



VOLUME 40

## **Identity and Exile**

The Iranian Diaspora between Solidarity  
and Difference

Edited by the Heinrich Böll Foundation  
in co-operation with Transparency for Iran



# IDENTITY AND EXILE



**HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG  
PUBLICATION SERIES ON DEMOCRACY  
VOLUME 40**

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**Idea and editing: Resa Mohabbat-Kar**



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The Iranian Diaspora between Solidarity and Difference

Volume 40 of the Publication Series on Democracy

Edited by the Heinrich Böll Foundation in co-operation with Transparency for Iran

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## PREFACE

For over two years now, the Heinrich Böll Foundation has been stepping up its collaborative programmes with groups and individuals that are part of Germany's Iranian diaspora. We aim to improve mutual understanding within the community and to extend the civil society networks of Iranians in exile. Past experience has shown that diaspora communities with their diverse identities and transnational traits are ideally suited to develop visions and promote development in their countries of origin, as well as in the countries where they reside. Well over five million Iranians in exile – about 120,000 of which live in Germany – are influencing political and cultural debates in Iran on a daily basis, for example via social media, and this gives them the potential to stimulate a further opening up of Iran. However, it is not easy to bring together Iranians in exile – especially when it comes to politics. The Iranian diaspora is very mixed, and it is split along ideological, as well as along social, ethnic, and religious lines. This reflects, on the one hand, traditional social conflicts – baggage that has been carried over from the old home to the new – and, on the other hand, there is political discord that either came about during emigration or even caused it, meaning, issues to do with the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and, to a lesser degree, the suppression of the so-called «Green Revolution» in 2009. This fragmentation of the Iranian diaspora impedes the formation of a collective identity and obstructs the ability of Iranians in exile to organise and act as one.

The present volume focuses on the construction of identities and the interactions between Iranians in exile. The aim is to promote a process of reflection within the diaspora and provide an input concerning the role and potential of the diaspora community. The Heinrich Böll Foundation can only assist such a process by offering a secure space for debate, while the actual reconciliation has to be undertaken by the exiled Iranians themselves. We hope that this volume will be able to kick-start such a process. We are happy to have so many excellent contributors to this volume – experts who as academics or practitioners have been dealing with the Iranian diaspora and its organisations; our special thanks go to them. This publication has only been possible due to the support of our partner organisation Transparency for Iran. We would like to thank Resa Mohabbat-Kar for his excellent work as project co-ordinator.

Berlin, November 2015

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# INTRODUCTION

«Whether ‹diaspora› is a common word, a scientifically constructed concept, or a rallying cry that gives meaning to a collective reality, it is highly contemporary. Denying this would be pointless»

*Stéphane Dufoix (2003, p.106)*

## Exile and diaspora

The above quote from French social scientist Stéphane Dufoix sums up his research into the colourful term «diaspora.» On the one hand, this categorisation obviously refers to ambiguities or controversial debates about what is meant by the term. Depending on the researchers' scientific background, concepts of diaspora tend to stress different aspects, which, in turn, result in different research focuses.<sup>1</sup> Subjects discussed when using the term «diaspora» include experiences of social dislocation and marginalisation of migrants, concepts of home and belonging «when in distant lands,» relations with and interrelations between the country of residence and the home country, and the mobilisation and negotiation of collective identities and «ethnicities.» On the other hand, Dufoix's statement also accentuates how remarkably popular the term is – for example, as a set phrase in politics and media used to explain certain phenomena, or as a way in which an ever increasing number of «affected» social groups and actors choose to describe and define themselves. Scientific efforts to establish clear definitions and analytical approaches towards diaspora mainly aim to distinguish it from related terminology – above all that of exile. The close semantic and historical links existing between the two terms makes such a distinction difficult, which is also why diaspora and exile are often used synonymously, not only in common parlance but in scientific discourse, too. One concept central to both categories is that of displacement – of being uprooted from one's home. This situation may be used to distinguish between the two concepts, at least in terms of ideal types.<sup>2</sup> Both terms describe more than just geographical uprooting, they also refer to ways of dealing with this situation and the ensuing process of coming to terms with and framing these experiences on an individual as well as collective level. In this respect, major differences appear among the affected groups regarding

- 1 The contribution by Amy Malek and Cameron McAuliffe in this volume presents a detailed overview of scientific discourses on diaspora.
- 2 A detailed overview of the shared as well as distinct characteristics of concepts of exile and diaspora can be found in Kuhlmann (2014).

processes of identification and ideas of belonging and home, which, in turn, result in distinct patterns of social, cultural, and political interactions and relations (Naficy 1993; Said 1994; Kokot 2002; Ghorashi 2003; Olsen 2009; Calandra 2013).

Experiences of exile are characterised by powerful emotional bonds to the home country, meaning the people concerned mainly identify with the «lost» home they left behind, and that this is the focus of their symbolic links as well as actual social relationships, all of which are ruled by the longing and by efforts to return back home. This fixation on the home country impedes or prevents the social, political, and cultural re-orientation and settling into the country of residence, which is why the experience of living in exile is often perceived as paused existence, as «living in limbo,» a provisional state – and a double marginalisation. A diaspora, on the other hand, means that its members are able and willing to renegotiate questions of home and belonging and let themselves in for a life outside of their home country, that is, they are trying to put down new roots. In this process, the old home country will still be an important beacon, something that may continue for some generations, however, the diaspora as a whole and its individual members build an active relationship with at least two other components, which may also impact the formation of identities and loyalties, namely, the public system and culture of the country of residence, as well as networks of other communities that share the same origins and are spread all over the world and that are interrelated to differing degrees. Thus, diaspora evolves within a triangle of exchanges and networks – as a community that, although dispersed all over the world, views itself as one and, based on this self-image, will develop its own identity policy and try to make it a reality.

## **The Iranian diaspora – identity and experience between continuity and change**

Over 35 years after the Iranian revolution, which marked the beginning of the continuing history of Iranian immigration, diaspora has become a key term for writing or describing this ongoing history, «what it is Iranians are and experience as a result of having left Iran» (Elahi/Karim 2011, p.382). Today, this question will be answered in other ways than during the 1980s or 1990s. Consequently, shifts must have taken place in the consciousness and self-awareness of Iranians, resulting in a new relationship with their respective countries of residence, with Iran, and with their compatriots around the world. Naturally, literary scholar Elahi and academics from related disciplines such as film and art criticism tend to look at the abundant artistic and cultural productions by people of Iranian decent in order to analyse new positions, identities, and relationships. According to the established accounts the changes observed qualify as being «diasporic» because they obviously express a productive examination of various influences and thus point to «multiple identifications.» Up until the early 1990s, the first generation of Iranians in exile, those who had witnessed the revolutionary upheaval and experienced traumatic loss, frequently compensated for their longing for the home country «as they had known it» by nostalgically reproducing what they thought of as «authentic» Iranian culture.

For these exiles, the cultures of their country of residence and the home country were often irreconcilable, mutually exclusive models of belonging, which were frequently lived and practiced in separate spheres – as a «public persona» in mainstream society, on the one hand, and, on the other, as an «authentic person» in the privacy of the home (Mostofi 2003; Sanadjian 1995 and 2000). When discussing the emergence of an Iranian diaspora, this means, first of all, that such points of reference have become «reconciled» and intertwining. Consequently, the resulting identity of an Iranian diaspora is more than a mere reproduction of the «authentic» Iranian identity and culture of the home country, as it includes influences and experiences of life in the «new home country» – including those of feeling not at home, uprooted, and marginalised – and forges them into a new source of identity. In this, Iran, the old home country, remains an important beacon, functioning not only as an «intermediary» that shapes this «reconciliation» but, even more importantly, informs the condition of Iranians abroad. The old home country continues to have an effect, as the way in which individuals view Iran and their own history constitutes an important factor informing conditions within the diaspora. The context in which the Iranian diaspora came into being was characterised by many conflicts – one can even call it *a diaspora generated by conflict* – and this means it comes with weighty historical baggage. Academic as well as popular debates about the Iranian diaspora are dominated by the view that «Iranians abroad» consist of nothing but a bunch of ideologically fragmented, competing, and largely disconnected groups, especially when it comes to their relations to and political attitudes towards the home country. Strained social relations within the diaspora should be viewed as the result of (conflictual) processes of identification that are being shaped equally by the social and political dynamics of the «old» and the «new» home country.

Studies of Iranian populations and cultures in North America and Europe show that the process of «repositioning» always goes hand in hand with the actual social and political environments and situations, meaning it is always influenced to a considerable degree by, on the one hand, the way mainstream society treats immigrants and «foreigners» and, on the other, its attitude towards the Islamic Republic of Iran (Malek 2011; Ghorashi 2003, 2007; Alghasi 2009; Khosravi/Graham 1997).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, although the longing for «Iranianness» is a constant factor shaping the diaspora, forms and ideas about what constitutes «Iranianness» are subject to negotiation, which, against the background of the actual environment, results in

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3 In her study, Amy Malek describes the shifting ways in which, over the years, the New York Persian Day Parade has portrayed and represented Iranian identity and culture, and how this has been influenced by the way in which public discourse has developed on issues such as international terrorism and the Islamic Republic of Iran as a threat to national security (Malek 2011).

new and distinct manifestations of Iranian identity and culture (Ghorashi 2004).<sup>4</sup> This interplay of continuity and change is especially clear when looking at the different generations. The second and third generation of Iranians, which is composed of those who have grown up abroad, is crucial for forming the identity of the Iranian diaspora. Part of how they deal with ethnicity and Iranian identity are the ways in which they take up and negotiate existing cultural «stock,» that is, the stories and the history of migration, the fault lines and the «baggage» of the Islamic Revolution – in sum, the cultural and historical memory and legacy of the generation that emigrated and fled the country – and how they attune this to their own and new issues, challenges, and obvious facts of life that are a result of growing up with the institutions and cultures of their respective country of residence (Mahdi 1998; McAuliffe 2008; Maghbouleh 2010 and 2013). This process of «amalgamating» influences and experiences bears witness to the continuity and change within the Iranian diaspora that occurs through adopting and continuing pre-existing, acquired discourses, cultural identities, and relationships – as well as rejecting, re-evaluating, and redefining them.

During the 1990s, while for many Iranians the provisional state of limbo that is exile began to dissolve, be it in material ways or in their self-awareness, and while they became (or: because they became) increasingly susceptible to the immediate, everyday realities of life and the influences of their «new home» – at the very same time this occurred, an additional, crucial factor began to take shape, as they became conscious of the histories, destinies, and circumstances of Iranian compatriots who had made other Western cities or capitals their home. Today, boosted by globalised mobility and online communication, as well as the consumption and the commercial success of some products of Iranian diaspora culture, an ever growing number of people of Iranian descent communicates with one another, thus coming into contact with different or similar experiences and forms of being «Iranian» or «living an Iranian life» outside of Iran.

As a consequence, an alternative Iranian map began to emerge, one that lies beyond the boundaries of the Islamic Republic of Iran and has nodes along the West and East Coasts of the U.S, as well as in Toronto, Sydney, and many European capitals. In addition to the «old» and the «new» home country, the network of communication and the relationships forming between these nodes offers participating Iranians a new and wider *transnational* frame of reference and identification, and

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4 During her fieldwork in California, anthropologist Halleh Ghorashi was surprised to find that many people of Iranian ancestry participated in the pre-Islamic, old-Persian harvest celebrations of «Mehregan.» These celebrations construct and preserve a conscious sense of having an Iranian cultural identity. In Iran's more recent history, Mehregan has not been part of national celebrations and thus has little meaning for Iranians in Iran. Iranians living abroad frequently fall back onto pre-Islamic symbolism and the history of the Persian empire of antiquity. This helps them construct and advertise an Iranian diaspora identity intentionally different from that of contemporary Iran, and this is, among other things, a reaction to the negative views of post-revolutionary Iran that dominate public perception and debate in many Western countries. (Ghorashi 2004).

a sense of belonging to a cross-border community outside of Iran – the Iranian diaspora.

If the self-perception of Iranians is changing as described, and if the mentioned new sources of identity are undergoing a re-evaluation, then this has the potential of becoming the basis of new patterns of interaction. A re-evaluation of one's position concerning the institutions and public spheres of the «new» home, which results from an increasing sense of identification, may lead to a new level of political and social participation – something that has been observed in Europe and the US (Naficy 1993; Kelly 2011, Sreberny 2000; Khosravi/Graham 1997). For Iranians in the US, cultural studies researcher Hamid Naficy observed that in the early 1990s a shift in self-perception (from «Iranian» to «Iranian-American») went along with increased political involvement in the «host country.» According to Naficy, this changed the social status of the Iranian population from exiles whose lives revolve around a «lost» home country, to «ethnic minority,» which points to additional objectives and needs that have to be co-ordinated and represented (Naficy 1993, p.195 et seq.). Over twenty years after Naficy's observation, it is evident that Iranian activities and associations in the US are no longer exclusively dominated by a focus on Iran and the overarching desire to end the enforced exile – be it by nostalgically enshrining a notion of the home country or by an unrelenting will to create conditions that will enable a return. Increasingly, Iranian publications and projects are focusing on the political, economic, social, and cultural experiences, interests, and challenges presented by living on an «alternative Iranian map» where Iranians have to find their bearings and position themselves as an ethnic minority, as well as, based on their shared experiences, as a «transnational community of destiny.» This does not mean that Iran becomes irrelevant for the activities and the outlook of Iranian diaspora organisations, however, its relative importance declines: «The initial exilic identity, with its rooted notion of a home left behind, was replaced by a more rhizomatic network-based diasporic approach to Iran *as one basis of reference among many others*» (Gorashi 2009, p.678; emphasis added). The anthropologist Halleh Ghorashi describes this change as a «moderation» of former «radical» positions on Iran. According to Ghorashi, the uncompromising rejection and radical opposition to the Islamic Republic was a key element of the first generation's identity as Iranian exiles and formed a pattern that dominated their organisations, which had strong political allegiances. Consequently, almost all activities to do with the home country were motivated by a desire to achieve «regime change» or, alternatively, to completely isolate the government and society of the Islamic Republic, and, during the initial period that lasted well into the 1990s, only such discourse and activities were deemed acceptable (Khosravi/Graham 1997; Ghorashi 2009). The change of identity patters «from an exilic to a diasporic identity» (ibid.) resulted in a more distanced and differentiated view of Iran and, gradually, made new approaches possible. Increasingly, Iran has become transformed from a lost place – either to be reconquered or isolated – into a place that people, who now think of themselves as part of the Iranian diaspora, may get involved with through social investment or civil society exchanges. This change in attitude towards Iran

is characterised by a rise in interactions with the home country, which are not so much informed by explicit political motives, but by humanitarian or developmental goals – and this, in turn, results in relief efforts, civil society exchanges, and capacity building, which means Iran is being increasingly recognised as a cultural point of reference (Ghorashi 2009; Spellman 2004; Kelly 2011). A decisive factor leading to these developments was the mass phenomenon of Iranian blogs and discussion boards (Khosravi/Graham 2002; Etling/Kelly 2008; Alinejad 2011). This led to an intensification and tighter intermeshing of transnational contact networks within the diaspora and, above all, between the diaspora and Iran – and it resulted in tentative new types of exchanges and projects that focused on specific interests and issues. Importantly, this multiplied the issues Iranian networks addressed through their activities, widening the scope of what was viewed as «legitimate» discourse beyond radical left positions and other ideological demands that had previously dominated and limited all exchanges (Ghorashi 2009). This qualitative as well as quantitative multiplication of exchanges and relationships with Iran is a very real development. However, studies of Iranian networks in Sweden and the Netherlands have shown that there are exceptions to such trends, namely, identities of exile that are defined by highly polarised interactions and practices, which still aim at regime change in Iran and tend to reject all exchanges or interactions that do not meet that objective (van den Bos 2006; Kelly 2011). Consequently, the development of the Iranian diaspora regarding its relations and interactions with Iran may be described as a dynamic mixture of continuity and change.

## Forward ever, backward never?

«How then has this group of religiously, ethnically, and linguistically diverse people with different pasts constructed an Iranian identity in diaspora? Why is Iranian immigration even termed a diaspora?»

*Nilou Mostofi (2003, p.685)*

This very basic outline of how Iranian identities, activities, and interactions outside of Iran have developed offers two ways in which to interpret the Iranian diaspora, and a closer look seems to point to contradictions that warrant a rather more critical investigation. While being in exile tends to be perceived as an individual experience, the term «diaspora,» by definition, refers to a group of people outside their home country, yet defined by common traits and outlooks. At least implicitly, our description and interpretation of an «Iranian diaspora» supposes a collective, that is, an Iranian *community outside of Iran* that views itself in such terms and that draws upon a common source of cultural and historical knowledge. After the involuntary separation from the Iranian nation, personal awareness of commonalities as well as a desire for them has facilitated a renewed «voluntary» process of community formation, which, even for the second generation, will still satisfy a marked need for



ethnic identity and belonging. However, this awareness of commonalities is based on more than just a common reservoir of past cultural artefacts; to a much greater degree, the potential of forming an Iranian diaspora identity derives from experiences undergone and made since emigration,<sup>5</sup> as well as from shared memories of what went before, and a shared view of an uncertain future as an ethnic minority. Conversations help realise this potential, and by putting their own past and future in relation to that of others, participants in this conversation will come to think of themselves as a «community of destiny and experience.» It has become very popular among Iranians abroad to call themselves part of a diaspora, and this points to an acknowledgement of commonalities that form the basis of patterns for identification and behaviour, which constitute the Iranian diaspora as a collective phenomenon.

On the other hand, the popularity of describing oneself as part of a diaspora can also be interpreted as a plea to strengthen awareness and commonalities. Whilst we characterised the development of the Iranian diaspora as an «interplay of continuity and change,» it is equally possible to contradict the notion of a coherent and homogenous Iranian diaspora by pointing to instances where continuity and change interfere, clash, and come into conflict, that is to say, where patterns of identity and behaviour do not develop in synch but are creating some serious fault lines. Sociologist Avtar Brah rightly points out that the potential for tension and conflict underlies each process of «diasporisation» to a greater or lesser degree: «They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure» (Brah 1996, p.193). When, in the early 2000s, Nilou Mostofi posed the question, why the Iranian immigrant community was being called a «diaspora» (see above), this was in reference to patterns of behaviour and relations that contradict the idea of a collective, that is, of a marked and widespread desire of ethnic belonging and being part of a community, as well as the potential of shared experiences derived from «living abroad.» Mostofi claims that, strictly speaking, a common frame of references that affects the immigrants identities has not forged a community as an entity with a certain degree of cohesion, interethnic solidarity, and internal structures, which may represent collective interests in the public and political sphere (Mostofi 2003). Mostofi's observations are part of a considerable number of empirical studies that all point to a highly differentiated community with little formal collective structure. Accordingly, the landscape of Iranian community formation resembles a «patchwork quilt,» consisting of numerous small and often informal and fleeting groups and microcosms with limited reach and frequently co-existing as autonomous structures that manifest commonalities and differences on a high

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5 In his detailed description of Iranian «exile cultures,» Hamid Naficy has pointed out that shared experiences of (cultural) alienation, exclusion, and marginalisation have a strong bonding effect (Naficy 1993). According to Naficy, «life abroad» and the «fight for survival» in an alien environment provide Iranian (and other groups of) immigrants with shared experiences that may form the basis of a collective identity.

number of divergent issues.<sup>6</sup> These structural traits correspond with qualitative ethnographic studies (predominantly concerning the first generation of emigrants and refugees), which have concluded that there is a marked reluctance among emigrant Iranians to engage with compatriots or participate in institutionalised activities (Sanadjian 1995, 2000; Ansari 1988; Kamalkhani 1988; Khalili 1998; Mobasher 2012). There is a number of interpretations that attempts to put such dynamics and patterns into context, namely those pointing to the divergent political identities and loyalties of Iranian immigrants, ranging from «monarchists» to left-wing Marxist sympathisers. Such incompatible perspectives on the home country's recent history are maintained in exile and go along with very divergent approaches towards Iran's political future. Distinct political loyalties are among the reasons mentioned most frequently to explain why Iranian diaspora communities are so very fragmented. Against the background of the traumatic years of the Islamic Revolution, there is little doubt that political identities continue to exert a powerful influence. However, the popularity of such explanations has to be viewed against the background of Iran's important geopolitical role, which is why the country is constantly in the headlines and oppositional groups of exiles also garner some media attention, which, in turn, shapes the internal and external perception of the Iranian diaspora. In addition to political camps there are further aspects that tend to amplify the importance of Iran, of people's origins, and of their pasts within the diaspora. Examples are the decades of authoritarian rule with its clientelism and patronage that produced a climate of fear and social self-monitoring and a corresponding culture of social and political organisation (Khalili 1998; van den Bos 2008); Iran's ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity that was reflected in its hierarchical structures (Bozorgmehr 1997); and the policy of radical modernisation pursued by the Pahlavis, which shaped the emigrants' pronounced class consciousness (McAuliffe 2008; Sandajian 1995, 2000). The fact of the matter is: The home country and the past remain a powerful background shaping the complexities of self-awareness, internal relations, and variations within the Iranian diaspora. Consequently, these factors will continue to inform the debates about the organisation of the diaspora (or the lack thereof), about differences in identity politics, and about demarcations within Iranian communities, factors that need to be appreciated and that require critical investigation.

## The goals of this volume and its contributions

The present volume aims to trace how abstract ideas about an «Iranian diaspora» manifest themselves in the self-awareness and identities of its members, how the migration experience and the numerous locations of the diaspora represent the past as well as the future, and, finally, how Iranians «practice» their diaspora existence,

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6 Even in places with sizable Iranian populations such as London, Sydney, and Vancouver, empirical studies have shown that there is little in terms of inclusive social or sustainable institutional structures, and social life is dominated by independent and unrelated groups and networks (Sreberny 2000; McAuliffe 2008; see also van den Bos 2006, 2007, and Ghorashi 2003).

that is, how its members define their community experience. A characteristic shared by most contributions to this volume is that they undertake a critical investigation of the «collective» – a term so very central to the diaspora that there is always a danger of idealising such «togetherness» as a straightforward and almost natural process of community formation. The overview given above will have shown that such an assumption – despite the many shared aspects of identity – is a huge oversimplification. Whenever we use the term «diaspora» as a framework for our interpretations we do this because it will highlight certain aspects of «togetherness» and enable us to pose critical questions. This is the perspective from which this volume attempts to describe and discuss the forces at work.

Our contributors are from Europe and North America, and they include social and cultural scholars, as well as people with a rather more «practical» background, that is, dedicated representatives of Iranian organisations and communities whose years of theoretical and practical engagement will help us investigate the issue at hand. This blend of academic research into the diaspora and hands-on reporting «from the diaspora» is what makes this volume unique and of interest to a wide audience. «[A] diasporic community, to remain a community, looks both to its past and its future» (Elahi/Karim 2011, p.386). This note by Babak Elahi and Persis Karim sets out the precondition for community building – something this volume would like to support. To build an Iranian community outside of Iran is an achievement, which, as mentioned above, is only possible through joint public debate and by articulating past experiences and future visions. In this spirit, this volume is not intended as a continuation of purely academic expert debate but as a stimulating input into wider discussions and an invitation to our readers in their respective networks to take up the insights we offer into the diaspora – and to continue the conversations.

**Amy Malek**, an Iranian-American cultural studies expert, discusses the terms «exile» and «diaspora,» which are so very central to the recent history of Iranian immigration, tracing them in people's consciousness, in the actual organisations of the Iranian community, and in academic literature. Taking up the two notions exile and diaspora, she offers a dual history. On the one hand she refers to certain crucial developments that denote the transformation from «exilian» to «diasporic» patterns of identification and behaviour – a process that, according to Malek, lets Iranians increasingly create networks and affiliations on a lateral community and grassroots level, something which then begins to shape their self-awareness. On the other hand, Malek describes the correlation between the changing realities of life for Iranian immigrants and the efforts of academic observers that try to classify these changes that take place right in front of their eyes.

While Amy Malek's portrayal of the Iranian diaspora focuses on the community experience, **Cameron McAuliffe**, in his contribution, «subverts» the dominance of an Iranian diaspora community that is conceptualised along the lines of a nation state by pointing out the power of identities and categories that «trump» an Iranian identity and play a major role in the diaspora's internal structures. Based on his long-term research into how second-generation people of Iranian descent construct their identities in Sydney, Vancouver, and London, McAuliffe compares the experience

of the secular «Muslim» majority with that of the Bahá'í and presents the resulting divergent constructions and perceptions of the Iranian diaspora.

In her contribution about female identities in the Iranian diaspora, **Judith Albrecht** points to categories other than religion and ethnicity that have a decisive influence on the lifestyles and communities of the diaspora. Clearly, women played a very prominent role during the Islamic Revolution, as well as for socio-political developments that happened since. Judith Albrecht describes how women have been instrumentalised by Iranian politics and Western media alike as female Iranian icons and stereotypes, and how women in the diaspora have to react to such attributions by building their own identities through social practices and by framing their own life-worlds. Women and their fate not only speak of the history of the revolution but also of migration, exile and diaspora. Thus they have become, on the one hand, «a national symbol of the Islamic Republic Iran and, on the other, a symbol of diasporic and exilic memory.»

Los Angeles, the «unofficial capital» of the Iranian diaspora, forms the background to the contribution by **Halleh Ghorashi** and **Donya Alinejad**, who diagnose a change in the identity politics pursued by Iranian organisations in the US. The authors describe the Iranian image of success, that is, a type of Iranian identity in the US characterised by outstanding educational and job performance, as well as wealth and elite status, as a central component of the Iranian diaspora's identity politics. This representation of «being Iranian» is underpinned by a selective interpretation of Iranian history and culture that bases Iranian identity exclusively on the pre-Islamic grandeur and power of the Persian Empire. Like all types of identity politics, this discourse, which has been invented by wealthy groups of Iranian immigrants on the American West Coast and, from there, exported to other parts of the diaspora, has a dual function – internally, it forges an identity and strengthens a community by mobilising people around a self-image; externally, it presents a positive image of the group and aims to integrate it smoothly into wider socio-political dynamics. From this starting point, Ghorashi and Alinejad describe a second generation that is increasingly challenging and questioning the production of such images and identities by querying the Iranian community as well as the majority society.

The contributions by **Ramin Jahanbegloo** and **Pardis Shafafi** can be read as a continuation and supplement to the previous article. In it, the authors provide us with an impression of the emotionally and ideologically charged nature of the conflicts that occur, when Iranians outside Iran negotiate over a legitimate, «correct» Iranian identity that is to give the diaspora cohesion and represent it appropriately to the outside world.

For Iranian philosopher and writer Ramin Jahanbegloo pre-Islamic Persian, Islamic, and traditionalist factors, as well as Western modernism, are the essential influences that shaped «Iranian identity.» Jahanbegloo sees Iran as characterised by a fundamental and questionable continuity of mutually exclusive identity politics, ideological discourses, and intellectual currents.

Pardis Shafafi addresses a type of identity conflict that has less to do with a selective perception of Iran's historic and cultural heritage, and is mainly shaped by the

discourse that presents the history of Iranian immigration as an exemplary success story of seamless integration, economic success, and social climbing. Against this popular depiction of the Iranian diaspora, Shafafi calls her protagonists a «diaspora within the diaspora.» They are the victims and survivors of the «bloody decade» of the 1980s – those who spent the consolidation period of the Islamic revolution in interrogation rooms and torture chambers or who lost relatives and friends. Even today, decades after the events, their political activism «from afar» is a fight for recognition and of coming to grips with their past suffering. Pardis Shafafi criticises the fact that this bloody decade and especially its traumatised victims are strangely absent from the collective history and memory of the diaspora. If they appear at all within the popular narrative of a «successful diaspora» it is as alien beings within a community of well-established and respected immigrants – as people living in the past, people with a fixation on a chaotic revolutionary moment, and thus obstacles to community building, collective progress, and success.

**Manuchehr Sanadjian** also investigates the absence of a process that deals with the past in ways that are public and collective and that address issues to do with displacement. However, his specific interest is identity construction among Iranian immigrants in Germany. What he finds is a regress to non-discursive practices – first and foremost culinary culture – as a common strategy among Iranians, as this allows them to avoid any painful confrontation or articulation of the past, while giving them the opportunity to express their identity and contemporary existence in ways that do not require words while still connecting them to the past. A further practice of self-reassurance is the «seamless» continuation of identity and relationship patterns that developed during the socio-cultural modernisation of the Pahlavi era. For Sanadjian the first generation of emigrants was the product as well as the main prop of this process of modernisation, and he describes them as members of the urban middle and upper classes with all the relevant patterns of identity and behaviour – people whose social life was decisively moulded by the rat race of class status and belonging to the new bourgeoisie, something expressed mainly through social and cultural processes of distinction. The Islamic transformation of Iranian society made them fear for their established lifestyles and class status – something Sandjian calls a fear of proletarianisation – and this not only became one of the main drivers of mass migration but, once emigrated, their main goal was to preserve their class status.

Against the background of such pronounced expectations and ambitions, the frequently sobering experience of the West (which had previously been idealised) that often resulted in precarisation, social decline, marginalisation, and discrimination, re-enforced pre-existing class dynamics, class-consciousness, and processes of distinction. This is the focus of the contributions by **Sonja Moghaddari** and **Sahar Sadeghi**, who investigate Iranians' experience of migration and describe how social boundaries within the diaspora developed as a strategy to deal with social inequality, structural discrimination, and being stigmatised as «Iranians,» «foreigners,» and «migrants.»

**Sonja Moghaddari** writes about patterns of behaviour and relationships she was able to observe in the run-up to an Iranian cultural festival in Hamburg, while

**Sahar Sadeghi** discusses how, in the US and Germany, dominant discourses about «national identity» and belonging are being perceived and internalised by Iranians living there.

This brings us to the final three contributions, all by representatives of Iranian organisations, and which, with their wealth of practical experience, open up new perspectives on the issues discussed above. Not only do they shine a light on changing self-perceptions and multiple identities within the diaspora, they also point to a new degree of self-confidence when dealing with one's Iranian identity and the Iranian community one belongs to.

**Narges Bajoghli** and **Mana Kharrazi** present Iranian Alliances Across Borders (IAAB), an organisation based in Washington, D.C. and the centre of a network stretching across a number of US states. The authors are part of the second generation of Iranians in the US, and the aim of IAAB is to support the identity formation of Iranian-Americans of their generation and feed their perspectives and goals into a wider network of Iranian communities in the US, as well as support community building.

**Yalda Zarbakhch** discusses DIWAN e.V., a Cologne-based organisation with a focus on cultural and identity-related activities and something of a German counterpart of IAAB. Yalda Zarbakhch states that prior to the founding of DIWAN there had been no space or event «compatible with the non-Iranian part of me.» What she lacked was something that addressed the «in-between,» meaning a shared experience of identity that responded to German and Iranian elements alike, thus reflecting the self-perception and the everyday reality of the second generation. Another focus is on event types somewhere between the «light entertainment» of Iranian parties and shows and those of organisations that focus on the home country alone. DIWAN offers a space to get together, tackle questions of cultural identity and belonging, and express the results through shared cultural activities, thus closing a gap because, as the author states, other Iranian organisations in Germany offer little that addresses the interests of the second generation.

The final contribution in this volume is an in-depth interview with **Asghar Eslami**, a founding member of Kargah, an association based in Hanover. Founded in 1986, Kargah, with a team of 116 (many of them of Iranian descent), of which 39 are regular members of staff, offers activities ranging from social counselling, job training, to political and cultural activities. On the one hand, the life of Asghar Eslami is typical for the first generation of political refugees: He was an active member of the left opposition against, first, the Shah, and then the Islamic Republic, which is why he had to flee the country. On the other hand, as part of the first generation of migrants, his life in Germany and involvement with Kargah is exceptional: His political commitment for freedom, equality, and autonomy that drove him into exile is something he continued by further pursuing his socio-political activities in his «new home country» – as an «Iranian in Germany» and member of an ethnic minority. Such insights into the work and ideals of Iranian organisations are of great value. Within their communities they are important initiators and nodes, and they are yardsticks by which to gauge the developments within the diaspora.

To the extent that such insights into the activities and positions of Iranian organisations also provide typical insights into the state of the Iranian diaspora, they may well be a beacon – because the ever-increasing participation of the second generation may be the wave of the future for the Iranian diaspora.

*Resa Mohabbat-Kar*

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AMY MALEK

# Displaced, Re-rooted, Transnational

Considerations in Theory and Practice of Being an Iranian outside Iran

The conditions and events leading up to and following the 1979 Iranian Revolution and subsequent Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988) contributed to a rapid dispersal of Iranians worldwide. Iranians who left Iran in the last 40 years have scattered to nearly every continent, creating a global population estimated to be between 4 and 6 million strong (Vahabi 2012). This population is heterogeneous along ethnic, religious, and class dimensions and includes individuals who identify as refugees, economic migrants, and international students, as well as those who are unofficial, variously termed irregular or undocumented. While Iranians reside in a notably broad array of locations, the majority has tended to concentrate in several key urban centers, including Los Angeles, Toronto, London, Hamburg, Stockholm, Dubai, Kuala Lumpur, and Sydney. Despite the estimate cited above, population statistics and demographic studies have been complicated by a variety of factors, including inadequate national counts, the continued unofficial status of undocumented Iranians, and the challenge of how to count second- and third-generation Iranians in diaspora, those children and grandchildren of Iranian immigrants who are often counted by officials as, for example, only American or only German, despite their multiple identifications or citizenships.

Much ink has been spilled by scholars, journalists, and authors about what has become known as the Iranian diaspora, referring to «the condition of a people who share a common ‹homeland,› real or imagined, and who, either by force or by choice, are dispersed to at least two different locations» (Siu 2005, p.514). This scholarly and popular attention can be attributed in part to the geopolitical volatility that followed the 1979 Revolution, keeping Iran in the headlines and thus relevant beyond academia. Whether through film, art, performance, or literature – including the memoir boom of the 2000s – Iranians outside of Iran have been particularly prolific in cultural realms, where they have interrogated their experiences of inclusion and exclusion, represented and negotiated their multiple identifications and, in many cases, worked through their co-existing attachments to multiple homes.

Though it was perhaps a coincidence that scholarly attention to the concepts of exile and diaspora reached its peak just as Iranians in these dispersed locations were experiencing shifts in their own exilic and diasporic identifications, it is nevertheless true that Iranian experiences offered important contributions in this scholarly trajectory. To be sure, it is also the case that these academic theorizations led

to a sense of diasporic consciousness among Iranians, and it is this relationship between scholarship and practice that I discuss below.

One of the earliest and most theoretically adept scholars of the Iranian diaspora is Hamid Naficy. His work on Iranian television in Los Angeles and exilic and diasporic filmmaking worldwide remain fundamental texts for the study of these forms of cultural production, regardless of national origin. In his 1993 monograph, *The Making of Exile Culture*, Naficy outlined his conceptualization of exiles through the study of Iranians in Los Angeles: «The term «exile» in this study refers to individuals or groups who voluntarily or involuntarily have relocated outside their original habitus. On the one hand, they refuse to become totally assimilated into the host society; on the other hand, they do not return to their homeland – while they continue to keep aflame a burning desire for return. In the meantime, they construct an imaginary nation both of the homeland and of their own presence in exile. The difference that sets the exiles apart from «people in diaspora» is that exiles' primary relationship is not so much with various compatriot communities outside the homeland as with the homeland itself. If they do return, it is often only a temporary visit – not what Nabokov has called the «grand homecoming», of which exiles constantly dream» (Naficy 1993, p.17).

The desire for return is paramount in Naficy's categorization. Although there has been a small but present trend of return migration by first-generation Iranian immigrants who migrated in the 1980s (Cohen 2014), young second-generation Iranians (Sreberny-Mohammadi 2013), and more recent migrants from Iran (Peterson 2015), given their initial motivations for migration – including religious or political persecution – many Iranians feel either unable or disinclined to live in the Islamic Republic of Iran. But in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Naficy was writing, return was for many Iranians an impossible dream, leading him to argue that, «what turns an émigré, expatriate, refugee, immigrant, or a person in diaspora into an exile is [a] double relationship to location: physically located in one place while dreaming of an unrealizable return to another» (17).

Yet, by the early 1990s, there was an increasing awareness among Iranian exiles that their conditions of exile were perhaps not, in fact, temporary. Many finally chose to unpack their metaphorical (or, in some cases, literal) suitcases and begin the work of settling in their new homes with a fresh, if reluctant, sense of permanence. Poet Majid Naficy expressed the experience of this eventual acceptance after years of exile in his celebrated 1994 poem, «Ah, Los Angeles!»: *Ah, Los Angeles! / I accept you as my city, / And after ten years / I am at peace with you* (Naficy 1999).

Perhaps in response to this increasing trend of acceptance and other shifts among Iranian exiles, in 2001, Hamid Naficy further elaborated his distinction between diaspora and exile through reference to cultural production, particularly film. As postmodernist diaspora theorists like Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall also suggested, Naficy argued that diasporic cultural production is less based on the exilic binaries of here and/or there, and is more rooted in a multiplicity, of here and there and wherever else (what Naficy described as a «lateral relationship to the diaspora communities and experiences» as opposed to a «vertical relationship to the

homeland» [2001, p.15]). Key to this distinction for cultural theorists at the time was a sense of community and communal experience inherent to diaspora. As Naficy described it, «diaspora is necessarily collective, in both its origination and its destination. As a result, the nurturing of a collective memory, often of an idealized homeland, is constitutive of the diasporic identity» (2001, p.140).

As Zohreh Sullivan argued in her volume of diasporic narratives, in diaspora the development of collective memory, transnational engagement, and negotiations of identity come together: «we see people knitting the story of themselves with the story of the collective after it has been torn apart» (Sullivan 2001, p.20). This collective memory and insistence on multiplicity of diasporic identity applies beyond the sphere of cultural production, of course, and is equally relevant to the social, political, and economic practices of diasporic communities.

While social scientists and cultural studies scholars were debating the expanded use of the term diaspora in this period beyond its historical uses to describe the Jewish or Armenian cases, Iranians in North America, Europe, and beyond were building ethnic enclaves, community institutions, and media outlets. As Iranian community formation began to coalesce around the world, Iranians who may have once self-identified as living in exile (*tab'id*) no longer thought of themselves only through reference to Iran and their new home – that quintessential binary of exile – but also through their dispersed kin, friends, and networks in Iranian communities in Los Angeles, Toronto, London, Sydney, and beyond.

Scholars began applying the term «diaspora» to the Iranian context as early as the 1980s (e.g., Dabashi 1983; Sreberny-Mohammadi/Mohammadi 1987). Given the increasingly additive orientation towards lateral diasporic connections, *diaspora* was used with increasing frequency in the 1990s to describe Iranians, as evidenced by Nasrin Rahimieh's use of the term in her invited contribution to a symposium on Iranian cultural identity at the First Biennial Conference of the Society of Iranian Studies in 1993 (Rahimieh 1993; see also discussion in Elahi/Karim 2011). Indeed, as the condition of Iranian communities abroad shifted, so too did scholarly classifications of them: while originally considered as *exiles*, Iranians became more frequently described as part of a *diaspora*, reflecting the growth of Iranian communities and institutions, and shifts in their self-identifications in the intervening years. Regardless of whether Iranians living outside of Iran traveled to Iran regularly or not, or whether they desired to do so or not, strong connections to fellow Iranians were maintained across generations and across borders. The pulls of cultural nostalgia and continued social networks with family and friends around the world have been reinforced by and are themselves productive of cultural products and entrepreneurship, particularly in the large population centers of the diaspora – but also, importantly, online.

Despite the early scholarly-applied nomenclature, community members only began to describe their experiences as one of diaspora in a pronounced way in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as a result of exposure to academic writing, interactions with Iranian scholars (themselves experiencing the shifts in identity they set out to theorize), or through introductions to the term via the growing diasporic Iranian presence online. Given the prominent role of cultural production in the declaration

of diasporic identities, a 1999 poem by Shafagh Moeel titled «Sipping lattes in diaspora» offers an appropriate example of this expanding self-proclamation. Perhaps more important, the poem was published on *iranian.com*, a popular website among Iranians worldwide in the late 1990s and 2000s, and one that anthropologist Shahram Khosravi presciently suggested had the potential to be responsible for «an increasing consciousness of the diaspora» (2000, p.13). From a café in Berkeley, California, Moeel wrote of her experiences of dispersal to an unprecedented global audience of Iranian readers: *Family everywhere I turned / Friends over every night for dinner / And children like me Like me / All around. / Then we turned four and five years old / And our world imploded / Off trampolines we jumped / And ended up in Germany, in Italy / In Sweden, in Holland, in France, / In Canada, and the U.S.A. / My closest childhood friend / Five thousand miles away / Maybe at a Toronto café / Sitting next to Toronto moms and kids / Feeling every bit as displaced* (Moeel 1999).

In these lines, Moeel described her feelings of displacement through reference not only to those in Iran or in her new home, but to her family and friends in other parts of the world. Thus, she felt some sense of recognition in a word she first heard in an academic setting: *I remember the first time I came upon the word / Diaspora / In some lecture / I looked it up that night / «Diaspora means displacement and reattachment, / Refers to rerootedness, that is living in another state, / And implies transnationality in its relations with / The homeland. / This displacement may be felt even by the second and later / Generations who reside in a country that is not the land of their ancestors.» / That's me, I thought. / Rerootedness, I thought. / Not the land of their ancestors. Exactly* (Moeel 1999).

Moeel's poem, published on what was then the premier online hub of the Iranian diaspora, not only served as a poetic articulation of collective experience but also as a didactic introduction to *diaspora*. Her poem inspired reactions on the site in the form of response poems and essays debating the interpretations of diaspora as marked by loneliness and dystopia versus its interpretations as a state of possibility brimming with potential. These debates resonated with (and at points echoed) cultural theorists' writings about hybridity and diaspora in other communities. Moeel's poem is but one example of the untold influence of the internet and cultural production on Iranians' understandings and adoption of *diaspora*.

The spread of diaspora in the Iranian context is also evidenced by the emergence of national and international institutions, particularly after the events of September 11, 2001. The aftermath of 9/11 resulted in new efforts to organize Iranian communities in the United States and beyond. The first International Conference on the Iranian Diaspora was held in 2004, organized by the founders of Iranian Alliances Across Borders (IAAB), a non-profit organization whose existence is itself indicative of this emerging community-level shift in attention towards lateral connections across the diaspora. Though they were formed later than national Iranian organizations in Sweden (1994), the United Kingdom (1995), or Australia (1986), national organizations in the United States, like IAAB, the National Iranian American Council (NIAC, 2002), or the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA, 2007), each used *diaspora* in some form to describe the Iranian communities they aimed

to serve. Through this increasingly common usage, the term spread among Iranians who found its application fit their desires for community identity and belonging without the exclusive emphasis on tensions between home and homeland.

Alongside this community identity, expressions of diasporic identity have tended to include individual expressions of hybridity. In his 2001 book, *An Accented Cinema*, Naficy argued that many former exiles have re-imagined their identities as «hyphenated,» expressing their multiple sources of belonging as co-existing productively rather than necessarily in conflict or tension. Where the hyphen could be viewed as marking a lack (of being «equal but not quite») in the plural societies in which they now live, diasporic Iranians and members of other diasporic communities have also viewed the hyphen as a potentially liberating identity that enables hybridized and multiple identities alongside a critique of essentialism (Naficy 2001, p.16). As such, Naficy described experiences of those who saw the potential in replacing the troubled minus-sign hyphen with a plus-sign: *Iranian+American* rather than *Iranian-American* (Saremi 2007). Pushing further, many Iranian Americans advocated for removing the hyphen altogether, arguing that there was in fact no primordial conflict between their multiple identities that required such a punctuated assurance of connection.

Arguments against hyphenization are rooted in an insistence on heterogeneity and resistance to an assumed fixity or pre-ordained essential identity (which some argued was inherent to assumptions of hybridity as a simple  $x+y$  proposition, where  $x$  and  $y$  represent fixed essences). Relatedly, sociologist Avtar Brah has argued that the utility of *diaspora* is in its use as a «conceptual mapping which defies the search for originary absolutes, or genuine and authentic manifestations of a stable, pre-given, unchanging identity; for pristine, pure customs and traditions or unsullied glorious pasts» (196). Such a position leaves open the possibility for a co-existence of «here and there,» but importantly, also for the often messy lived reality of «here, there, and elsewhere» – the lateral connections of diaspora.

In the Iranian case, the prevalence of the term diaspora in today's English-speaking Iranian communities suggests its utility is felt broadly. But it is important to acknowledge that, despite this increasingly common usage, not all Iranian immigrants or their descendants identify themselves with a community in diaspora, just as not all diaspora members ever considered themselves to be exiles. Moreover, the consolidation of collective memory and sense of collective action that can emerge in diaspora populations can also marginalize those whose experiences, desires, or commitments do not conform to those of a collective. Perhaps telling of this potential for conflict is a perceived lack of unity that persists within and across these Iranian communities.

The diversity of global sites of the Iranian diaspora is perhaps matched by the diversity of the communities that reside within it. Stratified by ethnicity, class, religion, language, and generation, Iranians in diaspora are also divided along political lines that have thwarted attempts at collective action by diaspora groups. In 2009, thousands of recent immigrants, second generation students, and former leftists rallied in over 100 cities of the diaspora during the Iranian election crisis, crying

«Where is my vote?» in solidarity with the thousands of demonstrators in Iran. Such a large mobilization of Iranians in diaspora was unprecedented and suggested that unity across these stratified lines of diaspora may be possible. But these rallies quickly turned into flashpoints for old rivalries. In Los Angeles, Toronto, and other major diaspora cities, monarchists clashed with leftists and Green movement supporters, fights broke out over the waving of pre- and post-revolutionary flags, and disagreements flared over the desired outcomes of political action. Alongside events like these, even in non-political contexts teamwork and large-scale volunteerism in the diaspora is still often limited by generational, ethnic, or religious affiliations.

Apart from these group-level divisions, the experiences of many individual Iranians have not been as positive as a hyphen-turned-plus-sign might indicate, and these experiences are not limited to any one location; discrimination, bullying, and negative media representations and stereotyping have occurred in all sites of diaspora, whether in Germany, Sweden, the United States, or elsewhere. The growth of lateral connections between and among Iranian communities in diaspora has been concomitant with the growth of the second generation in diaspora, where the experiences of children of immigrants challenge understandings of identity, home, and belonging. While their first-generation parents faced discrimination during periods of intense hostility between Iran and the United States, for example (such as after the 1979 Iranian Revolution or during and after the Iran Hostage Crisis), the second-generation experience in the United States has been marked by incidents such as 9/11 and the inclusion of Iran in then – U.S. President George W. Bush's «Axis of Evil.» The resulting discrimination against Middle Eastern and Middle Eastern-looking individuals, alongside continued media demonization of Iran due to its nuclear program, have meant that most Iranians in the United States have at some point negatively experienced their diasporic identity. While early first-generation Iranian Americans often chose to go by names like Mike or Mo, or disclaimed Iranian heritage in favor of Italian or ambiguously Mediterranean ones during the heights of U.S.-Iranian hostilities, the second generation does not appear to be undertaking the same degree of «covering» strategies as did their parents (Tehrani 2008). There is in fact some indication that the second generation is instead organizing and advocating for their rights to cultural belonging as Iranian Americans in the United States.

As Stuart Hall famously argued, cultural identity involves the work of individuals «constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew» in an on-going process of formation that includes both being and becoming (Hall 1990, p.402). This process is particularly acute in diaspora, where identities are negotiated in response to geopolitical and cultural shifts through diasporic practices and experiences of belonging, processes that Lok Siu has described as *diasporic citizenship* (Siu 2005, p.5). As diasporic citizens, Iranians are no longer stuck in the «endless paradox» of exile that Salman Rushdie famously described as «looking forward by always looking back» (1988, p.205; cited by Naficy 1993, p.17). Rather, Iranians have formed lives in diaspora where they build, develop, challenge, and engage in transnational networks among fellow diasporic citizens in ways that respond dynamically, if not uniformly, to shifting geopolitical circumstances.

Far from the diaspora theory heyday of the 1990s, most recently, diaspora has been criticized as a term so widely applied (e.g., to refugees and immigrants from any number of contexts or circumstances but also to a «queer diaspora,» a «cyborg diaspora,» or the «Katrina diaspora» [Dufoix 2008, p. 108]) that it may be no longer useful for descriptive or theoretical applications. Following scholars such as Rogers Brubaker and Stéphane Dufoix, today one might more fruitfully consider diaspora as a category of *practice*, as a «rallying cry,» a term to «give coherence to a group,» or to «guarantee greater visibility» – in short, how the term is used by journalists, state-actors, politicians, scholars, and community members themselves, whether successfully or otherwise, and whether their efforts are intended to self-identify or to exert political and social influence «here, there, and elsewhere» (Dufoix 2008, p.106). When viewed through this lens of practice, diasporic Iranians are self-conscious and deliberate about employing the term in their talk and actions. Drawing again from Dufoix: «Diaspora» has become a global word that fits the global world. It has been a proper noun [...]. Today it is a common noun. It «speaks» for itself» (2008, p.108). This self-evidence is reflected as much in the academic study of Iranians in diaspora – spanning disciplines and national contexts – as in the variety of diasporic practices in which they engage.



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# Unsettling the Iranian Diaspora: Nation, Religion and the Conditions of Exile

The classical Jewish diaspora, derived from the historical scattering of the twelve tribes of Israel, and the Armenian diaspora, which traces its origin to the expulsion of Armenians from Turkey in the early twentieth century (see Tölölyan 1991), both hold the experience of dispersal and exile as central to the conception of diaspora. In each of these cases, modern diaspora communities have been folded around and animated by national projects that have seen the formation of new nation-states. In a similar vein, many of the Iranians who have migrated or fled Iran since the 1978–79 Revolution would recognise a shared ‘condition of exile’ from the contemporary Iranian state. Hamid Naficy (1994), writing of the early experiences of Iranian migrants in Los Angeles, discussed the efforts to rally Iranian migrants together around this shared condition of exile. For Naficy, the Iranian diaspora media that emerged in LA in the 1980s played a central role in communicating a national project, to reclaim the lost Iranian nation, to a transnational network of diaspora communities that were held together through ties of movement and communication. Cities like London, Stockholm and Toronto, as well as Sydney and Vancouver, became important nodes in a transnational network of diaspora communities centred on Los Angeles. The construction of a coherent and tangible Iranian diasporic community, joined through a shared experience of exile from the contemporary Iranian theocratic state, has been influential in framing the communal relations of contemporary Iranian migrants. At the same time, this *national* frame of communal identity, ‘the *Iranian* diaspora’, is riven by alternate modes of belonging that present opportunities to think through new communal forms that unsettle a singular view of diaspora. In this chapter we look at the way the national Iranian diaspora, centred on the conditions of exile, may be unsettled by non-national modes of belonging that tie migrants and their families in a variety of ways into transnational relationships that criss-cross and intersect with more or less coherent narratives of Iranian national belonging.

The nation, in its political form as the nation-state, and as a container of social and cultural identity, has played a guiding role in the geopolitical and sociological landscape of the twentieth century. The dominance of ‘the nation’ in the framing of political, social and cultural relations relies upon the everyday or banal reproduction

of national discourses to the exclusion of other ways of being and belonging (Billig 1995). Research on diaspora communities, just as is the case for migration research more generally, relies heavily on the unproblematic deployment of *national* migrant communities as objects of analysis, often simplistically treating these communal forms as homogenous and internally coherent (Wimmer/Glick Schiller 2002). A primary concern with a normative analytical frame of national migrant community experience is the exclusion of minority voices, those voices that do not conform to the constructed discourse of national communal belonging (Werbner 2000; Mavroudi 2007; McAuliffe 2007a). In the study of diasporas, the dominance of national narratives of homelands and exile can work to silence alternative voices, which are either subsumed within national imaginaries of the homeland, or are elided altogether.

In the case of the contemporary <Iranian diaspora> understandings of homeland and exile are experienced differently by different groups of Iranian migrants. The narrative of Iranian identity in the modern history of the Iranian nation-state has been woven at various times around religious identity (Parsa 1989). The revolution, and the subsequent institution of the Islamic Republic, has brought Islam to the centre of what it means to be Iranian. As such, it is possible to discern a normative *Muslim* Iranian diasporic community dominated by secular and educated Muslims who have been excluded through the workings of a religiously conservative Muslim theocracy. What is more difficult to discern is the diasporic communities of minority religious groups who have also experienced exile from Iran. The image of a national Iranian diaspora privileges the national religion of Islam at the expense of the diversity of religious minorities that have historically suffered persecution in Iran, and thus are disproportionately represented among Iranian migrants. The construction of an Iranian diaspora thus tends to elide the experiences of minority religious groups who have fled Iran since the revolution, reproducing their minority status in Iran once again in the Iranian diaspora. In this chapter, I specifically contrast the conditions of exile from Iran across two groups from Muslim and Baha'i backgrounds in order to highlight the variability of experiences of diaspora. Through an investigation of the way these groups communicate with the homeland, how they imagine the homeland through cultural practices, and, where the opportunity exists, the way they are impacted by return journeys to Iran, this analysis provides empirical support for the presence of different <Iranian diasporas> that settle around the differentiated experiences of religion, class, language and ethnicity (see also McAuliffe 2008).

The discussion here is based on an investigation of the lives of the children of migrants from Iran in Sydney, London and Vancouver. In each of the three cities research was conducted with second generation individuals from Muslim and Baha'i background to determine how they thought about and performed their identities and what implications this might have for the production and reproduction of Iranian diasporic communities. Set as they are as interstitial actors living between two nations, the children of Iranian migrants are well-positioned to critically appraise the role of the nation and national imaginings of homeland in the construction of the Iranian diaspora. Before digging further into the ethnographic details of

the lives of the children of Iranian migrants from Baha'i and Muslim backgrounds, it is important to understand some of the ways the notion of diaspora has been used to describe the lives of particular groups of migrants.

## Understanding contemporary diasporas

Although the traditional conception of diaspora typically privileges ties to ethnic and racial identity rather than exclusive correlation with a national state, nationalist groups or governments often deploy diaspora politics in order to pursue agendas of nation-state building (Faist 2010, p.11). Whilst the concept of diaspora is very old, it has seen a revival of usage in both scholarly thought and public debate over the last two decades, in part to do with the increased opportunity for transnational connections associated with the spread of online communication and the intensification of global mobility. Robin Cohen (2008) describes four phases of the study of diasporas. The earliest definitions that emerged from scholars working on the classical diasporas tended to be prescriptive and were based on a structural analysis, formulating a set of fixed, <objective> features that qualify a social formation as diaspora. Here, the foundational experience of traumatic dispersion and exile from the homeland and the importance of the homeland to the collective memory of this forcibly displaced group were both deemed central to the experience of diaspora. Later, in the 1980s, the term diaspora began to be used more widely as a catch-all for «expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities» (Cohen 2008, p.1; see also Tölölyan 1991, p.4). The third phase of study on diasporas, from the mid-1990s, sought to apply social constructivist perspectives, drawn from poststructuralist theory. Research in this school of thought was more circumspect about the inherited lists of fixed attributes of diasporas and instead advocated the viewing of diaspora as a fluid category, focusing on the social interactions, practice, self-perception – and representation of social groups. This led to the expansion of the use of the term diaspora well beyond those ethnic and religious communities that had experienced exile and longed for a return to the homeland. A wide array of postmodern diaspora forms proliferated during this period, such as work on trade and entrepreneurial diasporas, and labour diasporas associated with Japanese, Indian and Chinese populations. In the face of a potential evacuation of the critical purchase of the term, the fourth and current phase has seen a moderation of the impact of social constructivist perspectives with a partial shift back towards some of the core elements of diaspora, such as the focus on exile and the homeland.

As a result of this intellectual history, contemporary research on diaspora communities is marked by a bifurcation between more structural and prescriptive analyses and those that take a more fluid and flexible approach to diaspora identities and concepts. Mavroudi (2007) accounts for this tension in the way diaspora is being applied in the literature by pointing to what she calls bounded (i.e. structural, prescriptive) and *unbounded* (i.e. constructivist, post-structural) approaches to diaspora.

The classical or traditional diasporas have been typically presented as «closed» homogenous and essentialised ethnic and religious communal forms. They are seen as «tightly bound communities and solidarities (on the basis of common cultural and ethnic references) between places of origin and arrival» (Soysal 2000, p.2). The real or imagined «homeland» plays a central role as the focus of a «teleology of return» (Safran 1991, p.84). This homeland orientation is noted by Brubaker as one of three core constitutive elements of diasporas, the other two being the experience of dispersion and what he calls «boundary maintenance» (2005, p. 5–6). The preservation of distinctive diasporic identities through boundary maintenance ensures the continuity of a distinct community identity in the face of the pressures of social and cultural incorporation. Diaspora is thus often used to describe a bounded and distinct community marked by displacement and exile, whose people possess a shared ethnicity, culture, (imagined) community and traditions, whilst also maintaining a relationship, whether real or imagined, to a perceived homeland (Mavroudi 2007, p.469).

In this bounded, structural form of diaspora, «the homeland often becomes a static place, in which [migrants] may invest, symbolically, politically, economically and culturally» (Mavroudi 2007, p.469). What is important to note is that these bounded communal forms often conform to the normalised category and space of the nation-state as a container of both the diaspora community and the homeland. In this way, the nation-state plays the role of a «fictive ethnicity» (Balibar/Wallerstein 1991), providing the logics that underpin and reproduce the diaspora identity. The contemporary geopolitical fact of nation-states (Agnew 2003) operates as a structuring force in political, social, economic and cultural frames to reproduce the diaspora in its image.

In contrast, in an effort to avoid the limitations of a national view of diaspora, those working in a more poststructural vein have promoted a more unbounded view of diaspora. As Stuart Hall notes, «The diaspora experience [...] is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary homogeneity and diversity; by a conception of «identity» which lives through, not despite, difference by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference» (1990, p.235).

Werbner aims to reconcile these competing frames through an appeal to what she terms *segmented diasporas*. Segmented diasporas are a reflection of the complexity that exists within national diaspora communities, where the members of these diasporas unite together in some contexts and oppose each other in other contexts (2011, p.114). Werbner reminds us that despite the characteristics that define them, diasporas are heterogeneous, and not all their members conform to the ascribed character of the diaspora. Viewing the diaspora as segmented recognises the complex internal politics of community and identity that can serve to unsettle but not necessarily invalidate national diasporas.

This analysis draws on these analytical attempts to reconcile the structural and poststructural elements of diasporas and applies this thinking to the case for the Iranian diaspora. In what follows I identify a range of similarities and differences in

the social and cultural practices and attitudes of Baha'is and Muslims in the Iranian diaspora that contribute to delineating distinctive Baha'i and Muslim experiences of the Iranian diaspora. The characteristics of these bounded forms, tied up as they are with notions of homeland and lost community, are evoked by the process of exile. For migrants from Iran (and their children) the condition of exile and its project of reclaiming lost community reifies the bounded nature of community in the form of a *national* project.

Hence there are tensions between the way diaspora is understood as a condition of Iranian migrant exclusion and, as shall be seen here, across the experience of religion that serves to differentiate the Iranian migrant experience. For some there is a political project of the Iranian diaspora that aligns with both imagined national community and their central position in this «Iranian community». For others, these imaginings of an Iranian diaspora are exclusionary – those peripheral to normative cultural belonging in Iran, remain peripheral in the imaginings of nation that are derived from diaspora politics.

## **Iranian Diasporas: exile and beyond**

The shared Iranian diasporic condition traces its formative moment to the overthrow of the secular Pahlavi regime and the institution of the theocratic Republic of Iran in the popular revolution of 1978–79. The totalising narrative of the «Revolution» as a marker of shared communal identity plays an important role in presenting a bounded and comprehensible Iranian migrant experience. Naficy points to the shared experience of exile as the basis of an Iranian diasporic community in Los Angeles in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The growing community of Iranian migrants in Los Angeles at this time saw the city dubbed «Irangeles» (Kelly 1993) or «Tehrangeles» by many, with estimates of the number of Iranian migrants ranging from 100,000 to upwards of 1 million (see Mojab and Hassanpour 1996). For Naficy, diaspora politics during this period was rooted in the operation of the diaspora media, producing the experience of Iranian identity rooted in exile that brought the Iranian migrant community together across the boundaries of internal difference. Despite the purchase of Naficy's view, others noted the persistence of a more diverse terrain of Iranian migrant identities. Bozorgmehr (1992) and Mirfakhraie (1999) both traced a complex of ethnic, linguistic and religious differences among Iranian migrants in LA and elsewhere that they believed was important to understanding not only the experiences of exile, but the notion of Iranian diaspora community.

A more nuanced reading of the revolution itself can provide one way of unsettling the notion of a singular narrative of exile as the motivating spirit of a coherent and singular Iranian diaspora. The revolution, whilst resulting in a broad condition of exclusion from contemporary Iran, had a differential impact on different groups in Iranian society. Whilst there is not room here to go into the detail of these differences, some general themes persist to unsettle the singular experience of diasporic exile. The period immediately following the ascension of the Ayatollah Khomeini to

power in early 1979 saw a round of initial political persecutions, first of the royalist supporters of the Shah, then widening to include the liberal and «communist» coalition partners who took part in the overthrow of the monarch (Forbis 1980; Keddie 1981; Parsa 1989). The resultant flows of wealthy and educated classes from Iran, and particularly from Tehran, dominated a first phase of post-revolutionary migration. Following the initial rounds of politically motivated persecutions, the emergent theocratic Shi'i-centred state soon created a dangerous environment for not only political opponents, but also the many minority ethnic and religious groups who did not fit the essentialist narrative of the new Islamic Republic.

The result of the systematic persecution of political, ethnic and religious groups was two main groups of formal and informal migrants who fled from Iran to neighbouring countries and beyond to the West. These initial flows were later augmented by families seeking to avoid the travails of the Iran-Iraq war (1982–88), and particularly those with the means to avoid the mandatory conscription of young male family members who were soon to come of age. For those with the means, flight from the theocracy saw them fall into migratory streams that led to sympathetic nations such as the USA, Sweden, UK, France, Canada and Australia (Sreberny 2000; McAuliffe 2005). Others were forced to first flee overland, sometimes involving arduous treks across mountain ranges into Turkey from Iran, where they applied for asylum. Others transited through northern Iraq before heading to Turkey. Many of these asylum seekers have subsequently resettled as refugees in Western European nations, USA, Canada and Australia.

In this analysis, the families of the children of Iranian migrants living in Sydney, London and Vancouver came to be in these cities by a range of means and following different paths. What was shared was the experience of exile. However, the conditions of exile were experienced differently by many. For some, maintaining connections with Iran was routine, whilst for others these connections were absent. The degree of connection to the homeland under the conditions of exile plays a role in the production and maintenance of diaspora identities. An investigation of the transnational connections to homeland, and beyond to those connections across the nations of the Iranian diaspora, is helpful in understanding the different experiences of diaspora.

## Transnational Social Fields

The degree and intensity of interactions between the children of Iranian migrants and «the homeland» provides some insight into the way the idea of a uniform and essentialised Iranian diaspora is troubled by the presence of internal diversity. These transnational connections with the homeland transcend national borders and develop transnational social fields (Vertovec 2001). In migration studies, the concept of transnational social fields emphasises the maintenance and manifestation of social ties to multiple sites and systems of reference. These transnational social fields provide one way of seeing how diasporas are practiced and serve to

differentiate the different groups of people who trace their backgrounds to the Iranian nation-state.

For groups like Iranian migrants who are excluded from their homeland, cross-border connections constitute significant indicators of transnational social fields, the children of Iranian migrants in Sydney, London and Vancouver demonstrated differing degrees of interaction with the homeland. For these individuals from an Iranian background, a primary determinant of initiation and maintenance of transnational social fields that connected their nation of residence and Iran was their religious background. More than any difference between the cities involved in the study, whether someone was from a Muslim or Baha'i background had a strong bearing on the nature of the interactions with Iran and whether there was any indication of the presence of transnational social fields that connected the nation of residence with the homeland.

The conditions of exile for both Muslim and Baha'i second generation from Iran has ensured a lack of access to the homeland for those who fled following the revolution. However, even under exile some mobility still occurred indicating that for some the borders remained relatively porous. Where this mobility existed it was limited to the Muslim cohort. Some of those from the Muslim cohort in all three cities discussed the way their family had maintained connections to Iran, with some parents maintaining economic connections, running businesses out of Iran including companies involved in importing and exporting goods into and out of Iran

Changes in the Iranian theocracy's disposition to the «Iranian diaspora» in the 1990s presented new opportunities for access to Iran. Motivated in part by the Iranian government's desire to take advantage of the social capital in the diaspora, some of those from a Muslim background undertook return journeys to Iran. For the second generation from a Muslim background who had not taken advantage of these changed conditions, the idea of a potential return to the homeland was a common theme. Of course, «the return» was for some of this group a figurative term as they had been born outside of Iran – they had never been there before. For others, who left at a young age, they had little, if any, concrete memory or experience by which to determine what living in Iran might mean. The return, whether they had been born outside Iran or left Iran as a young child, was rooted in the experiences of their parents and their exclusion from Iran. For these young Muslim background men and women living in Sydney, London and Vancouver, Iran was an imagined place understood through stories of their parents and relatives, and other older people from Iran they routinely came into contact with. Other influential representations of Iran came from the media, although these representations often formed a negative and essentialised vision of Iran as a place of danger and threat against which they framed their negotiations of Iranian national identity (see McAuliffe 2007b). For them, the return represented an opportunity to «fill out» their imagined conceptions of Iran, to bring some depth and complexity to the nostalgic images of the homeland that had developed over time. The conditions of exile sharpened the sense of desire for return amongst the second generation, whilst ensuring the nostalgic imaginings of homeland were more generalised than the desires of their parents,



who had the advantage of the experiences of life in Iran on which they could draw. One result of this was that the excitement and happiness of the return, when finally experienced, led, for some, to disappointment and confusion when faced with the complex reality of Iranian society.

Not all of the second generation from a Muslim background had the opportunity to return to Iran. Some expressed reticence due to ongoing concerns about the threat posed to their family by the theocracy. Where their parents were identified as royalists, some of the participants in the research said they were unable to return to Iran for fear of being arrested. For young men in the research, the threat of conscription was also a concern.

## Baha'i Faith, apostasy and mobility

In contrast to the case for the second generation from a Muslim background, for those from a Baha'i background across all three cities the conditions of exile were explicit and enduring. The persistent treatment of the Baha'i Faith as an apostasy by the Iranian Republic meant that Baha'is expressed a reluctance to return to Iran because of the risks involved, both real and imagined. For example, when asked if she would return to Iran, Fereshteh, a 20 year old Baha'i from Sydney stated, «if things get better, then of course, sure, but I don't have a burning desire to go» (McAuliffe 2007a, p.316). This lack of a «burning desire» for return was present across the Baha'i participants, who mostly professed a profound ambivalence about the prospects of returning to Iran, saying that they would entertain the idea in the future if the political conditions changed and they could make the trip in safety.

This ambivalence about the return was not simply due to the nature of their ongoing political exile from Iran. The years of religious intolerance and repression under the theocracy has led to many Baha'is fleeing Iran. The result is that the numbers of Baha'is in the cohorts of Iranian migrants in cities such as Sydney, London and Vancouver is disproportionately larger than in Iran. For example, in comparison to the estimates of around 300,000 Baha'is out of total population of 66 million in Iran (around 0.45 % of the population) in 2001 (House of Commons 2001), the 1,806 Baha'is from Iran in New South Wales in 2004 represented 17.4 % of the total Iranian-born migrant population. For most of the Baha'is in the study there simply were no close relatives left in Iran. This differed from the Muslim background cohort, where many respondents pointed to relatives back in Iran who were contacted when they returned. The absence of familial connections reduces the possibility of direct translocal relations (see Velayutham/Wise 2005). Yet Iran still retained importance to the more faithful of the Baha'i as the «birthplace of the Baha'is Faith». To better understand this relationship it is necessary to interrogate the theological approach of the Baha'i Faith to the geopolitical nation-state and the normative dominance of national identity.

The Baha'i Faith supports a cosmopolitan «globalist» perspective of world relations that positions the individual as a global citizen, embedded in the particularity of local relations, while at the same time driven by globalising imperatives that

problematise allegiance to national identities and the nation-state (McMullen 1999; Warburg 1999; McAuliffe 2005; McAuliffe 2007a). One of the stated aims of the Baha'i Faith is to bring about global unity, with national identities and the political and cultural form of the nation as manifestations of the «old world order». As stated in one key Baha'i text, the Faith «insists upon the subordination of national impulses and interests to the imperative claims of a unified world» (Effendi 1938/55, p.42). This eschatological globalism of the Baha'i Faith informs a particular engagement with the nation-state as simultaneously the context for contemporary action, and a barrier to global unity. In terms of their social and cultural attachments, many of the Baha'is interviewed expressed a desire for global citizenship and identity. The desire for global citizenship, sometimes expressed through an appeal to a global multiculturalist discourse of «unity in diversity,» drawn directly from religious texts (Effendi 1938/55), is positioned as preferable to ties to national identity. The notion of progressive revelation, central to Baha'i theology, relies on a succession of scales of organic social unity, «from the family, the tribe, the city-state, and the nation [...] to the point it has reached today, the first stage of a universal convulsion out of which is destined to emerge a unified, federated world state» (MacEoin 1976, p.7). For many Baha'is, downgrading national belonging as less important than global relations «fits in with [...] the notions of wanting to serve humanity and not our own country. I mean, your own country is very important, but serving humanity as a whole is what should take priority» (Monir, 23yrs, Baha'i, Sydney) (McAuliffe 2007a, p.320).

For the Baha'is, the ongoing religio-political tensions that underpinned exile, which contributed to the absence of relatives living in Iran, along with the religiously inspired problematising of the nation-state and national identity, resulted in the suppression of national nostalgia for Iran as a lost community or homeland. Many of the participants in the research expressed discomfort with the diasporic desire to return to Iran, with some challenging the assumption that the nation-state should be the appropriate geopolitical and socio-cultural object of nostalgic desire. In its place they referenced global metaphors, including references to the United Nations, but also referencing the global institutional structures and sites of the Baha'i Faith.

## The Return

As I have noted elsewhere (McAuliffe 2007), those who did travel to Iran from the Muslim cohort were able to make substantive connections with friends and relatives living in Iran. For some, this led to the instigation of back-and-forth communication by email that further intensified transnational social fields connecting the children of Iranian migrants with the homeland. The Internet has produced the conditions for a transnational public sphere within dispersed national communities. For the young Muslims in Sydney, London and Vancouver, the Internet provided the means to facilitate ongoing relationships with friends and relatives they met in Iran. Soroush, a young Muslim-background participant from Vancouver, noted that she only commenced email contact with her relatives once she had visited them.

When asked if it was after meeting them that she began this communication she replied, «Yeah. I had never met my cousins. I had never met my aunts, two of my other aunts. And they loved me as if I were their own child. It was unbelievable» (in McAuliffe 2007a, p.316). Similarly, Farideh, a young Muslim living in London when asked about communicating with people in Iran stated, «Oh, yeah. My cousins, a friend of mine who I've known since I was 14 [...] We chat sometimes, SMS sometimes» (in McAuliffe 2007a, p.316). Baha'i participants, in line with the results discussed above, were much less likely to have either made contact with or developed ongoing lines of communication with friends or relatives in Iran. Monir, a Sydney Baha'i when asked about communicating with people in Iran answered, «No. I don't know why it does, but that makes me feel uncomfortable to think about it. I don't know why it does, but I just can't really imagine. Because there's a lot of me that actually does reject the Iranian» (in McAuliffe 2007a, p.316).

It is important to moderate the extent to which we can rely on these email communications as evidence of transnational social fields. At the time of this research there was an explosion of Internet use going on in Iran, particularly amongst the young. Yet in reality the Internet played a relatively minor role in connecting the second generation with the homeland. As Skrbis notes, we run the risk of sliding into technological and social determinism if we fail to «resist the temptation to fetishise the importance of modern communication technologies and their impact on the identity formation of modern diaspora populations» (1999 , p.20-1). What we can say is that these connections to Iran provide some indication of the differences between the two groups from different religious backgrounds helping us to discern different Iranian diasporic communities set along religious lines.

## Transnational Networks

The general failure to instigate and maintain transnational links to Iran among the Baha'i cohort contrasted with their patterns of mobility and communication links beyond Iran. Many of the Baha'i second generation from an Iranian background across all three cities indicated that they had made connections with people from an Iranian background in other countries. They also exhibited a degree of mobility and propensity to travel to locations where other Iranian migrants lived. The differences exhibited between the Muslim and Baha'i participants when discussing transnational connections with Iran was far reduced once the focus shifted to connections with countries outside of Iran, with both groups demonstrating active engagement with Iranian migrant communities in other nations. In particular, almost all participants understood and expressed the importance of Los Angeles as a locus of Iranian diasporic identity, with many having visited, or expressing a desire to visit in the future.

However, what was also apparent was that these groups were generally in contact with those from the same religious background in these transnational networks. For the Baha'i participants these connections were a part their engagement with other Baha'is, which included Iranian Baha'is, often as a result of travel for religious reasons. The Baha'i «year of service,» a religious rite of passage that often saw

young Baha'is travelling to take part in development projects, or, for some, working as a volunteer at the Baha'i World Centre on Mt Carmel in Haifa. The year of service brought young Baha'is into contact with other Iranian Baha'is, facilitating a cosmopolitan network of connections that meshed with religious aspirations for global unity. Other Baha'is spoke of the importance of Baha'i «conferences» to their networks of connections to other Baha'is from Iran. These religious conferences were seen as opportunities to meet other Baha'is, but they were also significant as events where parents and relatives searched for potential Iranian marriage partners for their children.

The desire for endogamous marriage on the part of the family and relatives of the mostly young adult Iranian Baha'is contrasted with their often expressed desire to marry exogenously, with some citing the perceived weakness of an introverted national cultural view of relationships. For those who were practicing Baha'is it was often more important to marry within the religion than to marry someone from Iranian background which can in part be attributed to the dominance of religious subjectivities among these Baha'is from an Iranian background.

## **Cultural events – *Mehmuni* and *Norooz***

For the children of Iranian migrants in the three cities under investigation Iranian cultural referents, specific cultural events and practices played a significant role in the production and maintenance of cultural identity and diasporic imaginings of Iran beyond the barrier of exile.

*Norooz* (New Year) celebrations that occur around the vernal equinox in the last two weeks of March mark the commencement of both the Baha'i calendar and the official Iranian calendar. As such, these cultural events are important for both Baha'is and Muslims. All of the Muslim respondents across the three cities reported attending *Norooz* events, as well as the associated events of *chaharshanbeh souri*, which occurs on a Wednesday prior to *Norooz* and involves ritual cleansing by jumping over fires, and *sizdah bedar* on the thirteenth day after *Norooz* when the *sabzeh* (wheat grass), one of the seven items starting with the letter «s» that form the *haft seen* ritual setting for *Norooz*, is taken to be released in to a body of water, such as a river or bay. These events, including the *Norooz* event itself, presented opportunities for the «Iranian community» to come together. A *Norooz* event in North Vancouver attended during the research attracted large crowd; participants discussed large gatherings of Iranians at *sizdah bedar* in Cockfosters in London and Parramatta Park in Sydney as well as several sites in Vancouver. *Chaharshanbeh souri* as an event of ritual purification predates Islam and has roots in the Zoroastrian religion. This historical connection led to the banning of the annual event in Iran by the post-revolutionary government due to its misalignment with the state religion. This event, which is usually conducted at the neighbourhood level, or amongst groups of friends and family, is a small scale affair. However, in Vancouver, residential fire regulations have resulted in a much larger event, at Ambleside Park, close to an area of high concentration of Iranian residents in West Vancouver. This event, which attracts

thousands of Iranians migrants with their family and friends, has become a very public event for the «Iranian community.» Many of the second generation in Vancouver attended this event, and those that did not were aware of its existence. The Baha'i cohort were less involved in these different events. Whilst most celebrated *Norooz*, including setting the *haft seen* in the family home, these larger Iranian events were less attractive. There was a degree of ambivalence about participation in some of these more overt expressions of Iranian cultural identity among some Baha'i families. Zahra, a Baha'i from Sydney, noted that some took part in *sizdah bedar*, whilst her family did not; «I know there is an Iranian community. They have *sizdah bedar* [...] which is [...] I don't know what it is [...] It's held in a park and a lot of Iranians go there (and) some of them are Baha'i.» Whilst some Baha'is took part in these «Iranian events» of *chaharshanbeh souri* and *sizdah bedar*, involvement was not uniform across the participants. Some noted that their parents were involved, but that the events held little interest for them. Others noted that their parents were also not interested in these celebrations of Iranian identity.

In contrast to these formal and fixed celebrations of Iranian cultural identity in the Iranian diaspora, reciprocal family visits, or *mehmuni*, were another important cultural practice that served to reproduce Iranian identity among diasporan migrants and their children. The *mehmuni* occurs in the family home amongst a group of families who share food and company. These visits are by invitation and imbue reciprocity among the ring of families involved. Whilst *mehmuni* was not limited to either religious group, the Baha'is were less likely to be involved, particularly when the parents had moved to a more cosmopolitan stance or had rejected their «Iranian-ness» as a coping mechanism for their exile (see McAuliffe 2005, p.184–192). Although *mehmuni* is informal in structure for most of the year with no set timing built into the systems of reciprocity, around *Norooz mehmuni* hierarchies and reciprocities, for some, become more rigid in their application. The thirteen days from *Norooz* to *sizdeh bedeh* are characterised by more formal visits amongst the *mehmuni* families, with the most senior members of the group, both in age and status receiving visitors first, followed by the next most senior, and so on down the line of age and status. This more formal cultural tradition was more likely to be undertaken by Muslim respondents than Baha'is, as the Baha'is tended to treat New Year more as a religious rather than a cultural event.

## Conclusion: Iranian diasporas

For most of the Baha'is in this study religion was a key frame through which they understood and performed identity. Being a Baha'i was the reason their families were no longer living in Iran. It defined their condition of exile. But more than this, for these Baha'is religion was not simply a primary subjectivity in their personal understanding and performance of identity. The eschatological globalism that animates their theology and religious practice subordinates the nation as a base form of socio-cultural and geopolitical attachment that must be overcome in order to reach a new world order. This worldview disrupts and unsettles the normative power of

national identities as they have been discussed in the literature. Yet their exile is also a national experience that remains important, as a tangible diasporic communal experience that is particular to Iranian Baha'is. For the Muslim cohort, religion and religious practice was less important. Most were secular Muslims, where Islam formed the cultural context of their understanding of Iranian community. Islam, for them, was deeply ingrained in the idea of Iran, intertwined to the extent that it was difficult to untangle. The revolution, which precipitated exile, has nevertheless strengthened the normative connection between religion and nation, rendering Islam as an incontrovertible part of the connective tissue of their Iranian identity. Both of these groups experience the Iranian diaspora differently to the extent that we can perceive different Iranian diasporas. At the core of this model of diasporic belonging there is a structural firmament in the form of a national experience of exile and diaspora that provides the narrative structure for communal belonging. This grounding is supplemented by different experiences of the Iranian diaspora that provide a range of diverse narratives that sit in counterpoint and produce multiple and dynamic experiences of diaspora.

Being in the second generation was significant. The children of Iranian migrants experience the homeland as a series of traces that animate their nostalgia for lost community. The imaginings of home are not primarily grounded in the memories and experiences of their own lives, but articulated through others – through the stories or parents and relatives and through other representations of Iran, all of which colour their imaginings of home. The nation is an easy container within which identity has been shown to reside in modern diasporas. It provides the social and cultural fabric of a bounded communal experience. Other subjectivities intersect with national imaginings of home to destabilise the sanctity of this national narrative. Class, generation, ethnicity, language, and, here, religion, provide the locus for other ways of being that, whilst bounded themselves, result in the experience of unbounded and more fluid conceptions of diaspora. What this work traces is the tension between bounded and unbounded diasporic identities, as both reliant on static conceptions of communal belonging, and yet dynamic and shifting around the intersection of different ways of being.

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JUDITH ALBRECHT

# «How to be an Iranian Woman in the 21st Century?»

## Female Identities in the Diaspora

*The following contribution and the case studies discussed therein are based on nearly two years of research in Berlin, Tehran, and Los Angeles. My central focus was the social construction of female identities in Iran – and how this is being viewed by different actors elsewhere. While still in Iran, many of the women I am writing about had been artists, journalists, lawyers, filmmakers, or authors, or they had been involved in politics and/or members of the aristocracy, which is why, after the revolution, they migrated to Germany or the US. My interest was in their motives and strategies. The names of women quoted below have been changed. The glimpses of diasporic life and the voices I present are, by necessity, only fragments. However, all these fragments have one thing in common, namely, that the women, when talking about themselves and discussing questions of social belonging and roles, still grapple with their status as icons of a past revolution and the ensuing establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which propagated and instrumentalised certain images of women.*

The socio-political changes in Iranian society are most striking in relation to the female body. The unveiling and veiling of bodies divides Iranian history into a «before» and an «after.» The revolution of 1979, as well as the process of nation building undertaken by Iran's theocracy, promoted the iconisation of women. The theocratic government turned women veiled with a black hijab or chador into national symbols and religious representations of Iranian womanhood. As a consequence, women, who had taken part in the revolution and later rejected it as a failure, became symbols of a movement that had turned against them or their families, and their role became laden with political and religious symbolism – not only in the Islamic Republic of Iran, but also in the West. Ever since then, women have had to deal with this kind of prevalent religious symbolism as something that dominates their own womanhood.

Iranian emigration to Europe and North America is closely linked with recent political and social change in Iran. Since the revolution of 36 years ago, waves of migrations that took place for different reasons and followed different routes have resulted in a community with transnational links, a community however that is multiethnic, as well as socially, politically, and religiously diverse. Within these very

heterogeneous groups that are spread around the world, concepts of masculinity and femininity are closely linked to past and present political processes in Iran, and, as a consequence, issues touching on the relationship between the sexes and on gender politics are not marginal political questions but closely linked to social and political attitudes in Iran. Thus, every investigation into Iranian identities and affiliations will touch on the relationship of the sexes and related political issues within the diaspora. The degree to which women participated in the Iranian Revolution was unique in the country's history, and it seemed that the revolution gave them an opportunity to challenge and change the dominant patriarchal gender relations. The media followed the protests and changes in Iran closely, with TV becoming the most important news medium in an increasingly globalised world. Media images of protesting masses were broadcast around the world and shown on numerous channels. Today, in addition to people who migrate as they have done for millennia, there is also a global migration of media images. These images greatly influence the views and perspectives in those societies where Iranians live today.

In April 1979, Iran's monarchy was abolished in a referendum and replaced by the Islamic Republic. At the same time, many revolutionary activists were persecuted and killed. All the Iranians in diaspora or exile that I have met and who belong to this generation were either persecuted themselves or had family members or friends that had been persecuted, arrested, or executed. The experience of the revolution and its consequences made many Iranians doubt or even break with Islam, and left ideologies, too, underwent a crisis, as activists had to admit that their political aims had not been realised.

For me, the resulting social, religious, and ethnic diversity of the Iranian diaspora represents unity and plurality at the same time, and in spite of the dynamics that exist between different countries and continents of residence, the diaspora shares common references to the home country where friends or family were left behind. However, the groups of women presented here vary significantly regarding their political commitments and experiences, their religious beliefs, and their economic and social capital. This results in widely different ideas of what constitutes femininity and Iranian identity – ideas that get passed on to the next generation and that are the subject of debate within this international network. Depending on their previous socialisation and social position in Iran, Iranian women of the same generation may lead very different lifestyles, while, on the other hand, shared generational styles can also be a strong connecting factor informing the communication within women's transnational networks. As a consequence, relationships and connections do not necessarily form in people's immediate environment or neighbourhood, be it in Los Angeles, Berlin, or Tehran, but between people who share similar generational lifestyles or hold corresponding political or social views. Spatial proximity is thus often negated, and in a transnational space people will often get closer and communicate more because of shared lifestyles, political views, or professional backgrounds than with Iranians who are their neighbours. For Iranians living in exile or as part of the diaspora, the above-mentioned iconisation of women during the political upheavals in Iran took on a whole new level of meaning. There are many tales of

women and their fate during the Iranian revolution and migration, and, as a result, women and the symbolism attributed to them play an important role in the formation of a collective memory of Iranians. However, collective memory is always linked to judgements and interpretations of actual people and groups, something that varies across the Iranian diaspora. Members of the Iranian diaspora are constructing their own versions of historical and political events, thus creating a collective political memory that is in conflict with the one promoted by the religious regime in Iran. This is especially true when it comes to the relationship between religion and politics and the related issue of gender roles and identities, as this will always touch on issues to do with power and with influence over aspects of memory. Who may memorialise what – and what memory is out of bounds? What narratives may be told – and which ones will be censored?

In a twofold sense, Iranian women have thus become icons of Iranian society – as national symbols of the Islamic Republic of Iran and as symbols in the memories of the diaspora and those in exile. The Iranian student's and women's rights activist Shirin, who now lives in New York, stresses the problematic nature of simplifying and objectifying femininity that goes hand in hand with the iconising and stereotyping of Iranian women. In this, she holds, the role of the media is a central part of the problem.

«The media is not playing a helpful role here. The propaganda in Iranian television, but also the western media are creating a distorted image. This woman has become an icon which is not used in a very honest way. As a woman that comes from that culture, I don't feel comfortable with the way they are objectifying femininity. It is not going into the «underlying» of what this feminism in Iranian culture is. Media is just using the icon as an objective thing. And as much they are using it, it becomes a cliché.»

*(interview with Shirin, 26 August 2008)*

Iranian and Western media alike produce attributions that are governed by the politicised interplay of images and counter images. While Iranian propaganda solely projects a religious image of women, Western media tend to turn Iranian women into symbols of the contradictions of Iranian society. For the Western media, Iranian women have become, once again, symbols of social change. Images of such women currently shown in the Western media point out that, in spite of the strict Islamic regime, Iranian women increasingly display «un-Islamic» Western traits. Pictures of young women wearing the chador and displaying signs of a recent nose job, as well as of women in Tehran wearing short, close-fitting coats, makeup, sunglasses, and only the wisp of a headscarf are visual markers of what the Western world views as contradictions.

«They are only showing pictures of women: Women, who are voting. They show women at a football game. Women wearing the chador. Women in

chador are shown with a gun, women driving a police car, women, who are protesting, if man wouldn't exist. A lot of times, I try to distance myself from the exaggerations that people come up with about Iran. I don't blame people that they have the interpretation they have. Most of the people have never been to Iran. It is a complex society and media shows certain images. But I don't want to tell people: «Hey, my mother does not burn American flags every day!» or: «No, we are not partying everyday like hell! No, my sister in Iran does not look like the veiled women on the cover of the *Economist*.» That is the exaggerations which people get from the media.»

*(interview with Shirin, New York, 20 August 2008)*

Such exotism and exaggerations of one variety or another have the effect that Iranian women will frequently define their identities and speak about themselves and their role in society by negating the attributions of others.

«Usually, I try to talk in a grey zone about myself and Iranian women. I try to show the complexity of our reality, but if people give me just the darkest site of Iranian reality for women, I realized that I paint a much more positive picture of reality. I observed some of my Iranian friends, who would tell people just about partying in Iran, just to show that we are the same like the people in USA or Europe.»

*(interview with Bahar, Los Angeles, 25 August 2008)*

## **Personal projects within a politicised sphere**

Past collective experiences of political activism in Iran and the realities of exile mean that Iranian life in Berlin takes place within a politicised sphere. My observations and interviews indicate that within Berlin's Iranian community it is activists and revolutionaries, people who have lived through exceptional times of change, terror, and violence, that dominate the debate about gender roles and female identities. Here, the category of «the political» is central to female identity. Iranian women who migrated at a later period or who come to Berlin today and who have different attitudes towards religion, politics, and gender roles find it difficult to relate to the politics of the exiled community. During the early part of my research, I did not encounter any religious women, and the group of women I knew did not communicate with such individuals. The non-existence of any form of dealing with religion led me to believe that there are no religious Iranian women in Berlin. Subsequently, during private meetings with individual women, I asked again and found that, especially among the group of women who had come to Germany in the late 1990s, there were practising Muslims. However, they tended to avoid certain events and

meetings, which, for them, were too much dominated by the first generation of women in exile.

Women activists of the first generation describe themselves as independent, as living their own lives, and they explicitly oppose Islamic feminism. For the Berlin activists I spoke to, the expression «Islamic feminism» is a contradiction in terms, and Islam is perceived as having no emancipatory potential. Which is why they find it very hard to get together someone who identifies as religious. Most of these women were part of the revolution that shook up their country; they were persecuted, imprisoned, or they had to go underground before leaving Iran. They are largely atheists and reject any religious, Muslim identity, which makes it the more difficult for them that German society will, again and again, view them as Muslims. Their experience of a violent Islamist regime makes these women openly reject Islam. Their German environment that tends to perceive them as Muslims, thus attributing to them a religious identity, further reinforces this negative attitude towards Islam. One of the women I interviewed described the problem with such essentialist attributions as follows:

«However, *you* may say: «I've been born in Berlin; I've been christened but don't go to church; I believe in some higher essence, yet wouldn't call it God; I do a bit of yoga, etc.» [...] I, as an Iranian woman, would like to be able to say the same thing, namely that I'm a bit of this and a bit of that.»

*(interview with Farifteh, 5 May 2005)*

These women reject being seen as «Muslim,» still they do not want to be perceived as just an «identical copy of a Western woman» either. Consequently, most of the women I spoke with had developed a strategic way of dealing with such categories. The statements by Nastin and Azadeh from Berlin are exemplary for this range of possible Iranian female identities.

«If I tell people that I'm from Iran but that I'm not religious, they'll say: «Oh, so you're Western?» Then I say: «No, I'm Iranian and not religious.» If you're not Muslim people think you must be Western. This is our problem, see – for most people here there are only those two categories and, in public discourse, we don't exist at all.»

*(interview with Nasrin, 8 July 2004)*

«It's tiresome when you have to explain everything again and again. Whenever I want to have a conversation without all the baggage, I tell people that I'm Persian. That gives Germans a completely different notion: the Shah, nobility and wealth, princesses and the Arabian Nights. If I tell them that I'm Iranian, I always will have to explain that I do not pray, eat pork,

am not religious – and that there are other women like me in Iran; that women attend university there, etc. Whenever you say, you're Persian, you will be treated well.»

*(interview with Azadeh, 3 April 2005)*

There are similarities between this generation of Iranians and the movements in Germany identified with the year 1968, as both aimed to challenge old structures and develop new lifestyles and modes of self-determined living. In her book *Lebensentwürfe im Exil* (Modes of Living in Exile), sociologist Tahereh Agha dubs those women the «daughters of modernisation.» Frequently, those women used the opportunity to go to university and become involved in politics as a way to break with stifling family ties and achieve their own personal and social liberation. The family was of central importance in the narratives of all the women I spoke with, and many stories and memories revolved around them.

Other than their mothers and grandmothers, this new generation of women tried to achieve greater self-determination by participating in a working environment and in the public sphere. This transformation often went hand in hand with a very painful break with their family and domestic environments. During this period, the political groups that opposed the regime were chosen as a «substitute family» in order to make up for the loss incurred by rejecting the safety and comfort of the home. The re-Islamisation and political persecution that followed forced women in the diaspora and within Iran to adjust their outlooks, and, in exile, political activism became an important part of finding a new purpose in life. Political activism was one of the few constants in the lives of these women, as it had been the reason they had to flee and go into exile in the first place. Many of them fled the country on their own, while many others separated from their partners after settling in Germany. Among the reasons for this were the strains of exile, the loss of home, unemployment, precarious living conditions, and being excluded from certain aspects of social life. Many Iranians describe the loss of status, which resulted from migration, as a very difficult and painful experience.

«The respected film director from yesterday becomes the unknown taxi driver from tomorrow.»

*(interview with Dr. Milani, San Diego, 2005)*

The readjustments necessitated by living in a foreign country resulted in new modes of living within this highly politicised space, and there is a clear tendency to develop individual political stances. Former collective political ideologies were renounced and some groups adopted feminist ideas. For example, artist and poet Fereshteh opened the interview by stating:

«I'm neither a feminist, nor a communist; I'm no Leninist and no Maoist either.»

*(interview with Fereshteh, Berlin, 2005)*

For her it was important that her work as an artist is appreciated without any kind of political implications. Other women, however, unambiguously professed themselves feminists and supporters of the women's movement, while still others said that they thought of themselves today as human rights activists and had no allegiance to any political camp in particular.

Many of the women living in exile know the realities of life under the new regime only from hearsay, and they doubt much of what they hear. Rabeah, a journalist from Tehran, told me that her sister, who has been living in Germany for over 20 years, comes to visit her now and then, yet it was always clear to her that she did not feel at home. Whenever Rabeah talks about Iran and her life in the country, she notices that her sister lacks much information. Rabeah thinks that, by now, the Iranian women living abroad have a rather abstract notion of Iran. Their views derive from films, books, and second-hand stories, and they are unfamiliar with contemporary Iran. Afshar pointed to similar experiences with her sister when she said: «My sister could come back to Iran, but she couldn't trust.»

There is also mistrust among Iranian women in Berlin regarding Iranian women's organisations. They are frequently accused of not being independent of the government and of practising self-censorship. As a consequence, it is difficult for Iranian women in exile to build relationships with Iran and Iranian women's groups.

«To me, what happened after the fall of the Shah [...] I would never call that a women's movement. Of course, at the time, women's protests were a very good thing – an important signal. However, I can't say that that was the beginning of a women's movement. Looking back, I don't think there is or was a women's movement. Everybody familiar with the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran will not believe that any kind of social movement or women's movement is even possible under this regime. People are under constant surveillance and suffer oppression.»

*(video interview with Forough, 5 May 2005)*

If one compares domestic Iranian perspectives with those of exiles it becomes clear that the exile environment presents a discreet space of influences and experiences that mould people's views of the past, present, and future.

«Because exile is the space in which we negotiate relationships with imaginary pasts, it becomes the site where new cultural imaginaries, unexpected

in-betweens, and group identity formations reproduce some of the fault lines that constitute both the old and the new imagined nation.»

*(Sullivan 2001, p.201)*

Views of the past, present, and future that are informed by exile are part of the everyday life of women and their families. As part of this process, the past is recast in order to make it fit present realities. Before looking into the Los Angeles Iranians, I would like to highlight the generation of daughters of the political women activists in Berlin. These young women grew up in Germany or arrived here as small children with their parents. They are a new generation: Women who increasingly want to get to know their parents home country and who deal with Iranian society in a number of ways (as academics, artists, etc.).

Thus, they are continuing the sizable academic and artistic output of the Iranian diaspora and community in exile. Because they were socialised in Germany, their framework differs from that of the first generation. Among this second generation of daughters, one can distinguish between those that visit Iran and those that do not (with the latter group continuing their parents way of life in exile).

The confrontation of this second generation with life in Iran is often described as an ambivalent experience with conflicting projections and realities. In the chapter on methodology of her ethnologic study of Tehran's dance scene, Niloufar Shahisavandi paints a vivid picture of this:

«Here, I have to disclose that I did not venture out without prejudices. My image of Iran and its people was shaped by my family and earlier trips to the country. I thus approached my project with certain preconceived ideas – and, although I was aware of the fact, I soon began to notice that certain notions were lodged deep in my unconscious – and that certain situations ran counter to them. At the same time, I suspect that my sources also had certain preconceived ideas about me – as a woman born in Iran but brought up in the West. In the end, these encounters disproved all pre-existing clichés and prejudices.»

*(Shahisavandi 2012, p.25)*

Azine, for example, related how, during her first visit to Iran, her uncle, whom she met for the first time, turned out to be an authoritarian patriarch who expected her to conform to the female role of niece and obey his commands. In her mother's memories and tales, however, he had appeared as a courageous revolutionary and a rather bohemian character. Because of her socialisation in Germany, the daughter had assumed that he would treat women and men as equals; her stay in his house proved otherwise.



The young women I spoke with described in much detail their experiences in today's Tehran – a city very unlike the one in which their parents had grown up or studied.

Young women belonging to the second generation often develop their own views of Iranian society. This process is fraught with conflict – be it in relation to their parents' life in exile or their role within the relationship with relatives living in Iran.

### **«We feel somehow in between» – female experiences in Los Angeles**

It is no coincidence that there is even a name for Iranian Los Angeles – «Tehrangeles.» The Iranian diaspora in the US is very diverse, with almost two million Iranians, 400.000 of which are living in the Los Angeles area. Their lives are very diverse and stretch across different spheres. In Berlin, the generation of former revolutionaries is still influential, the Los Angeles diaspora, however, is dominated by socially conservative, monarchist families. The women I met were mostly from wealthy families, either belonging to the old Iranian elites or to those who made their fortunes in the US. Universally, they saw themselves as apolitical. Many Iranian families living in Orange County pointed to Islam as an integral part of Iranian culture. The programmes of Ebessina, the local Iranian culture centre, supports families on family and intergenerational issues and by conveying values that are regarded as «Iranian.» The centre offered Koran lessons for children, there were Heftar (breaking the fast) celebrations, and children fasting during Ramadan were awarded small prizes. Iranian get-togethers and celebrations aimed to offer a cultural counterbalance to US society.

In the Los Angeles area, leftist political positions from the period of the revolution have been marginalised. Professor T., who said she was part of the left and had participated in the revolution that overthrew the Shah, described this as follows:

«Now, I am going for human rights. I am not a member of any political group. I am quiet disillusioned about all of them. I have contacts to this rich people from Iran, who are not interested in politics, but I get bored after a while. The monarchist wanted to work with me, but I had the feeling they wanted to instrumentalise me, and I am still anti-monarchist. Some of them do not talk with me, because I said in an interview that I will not join a demonstration, because it was organised by monarchists. I do not think they are going for democracy. So you see how democratic they are, if they do not talk with me anymore or tell me: <You cannot say that in public.> But it is good to have contact to different people, also for fundraising.»

*(interview with Professor T., 15 September 2005)*

Iranian women who fled the revolution and came to the US often arrived with their parents, husbands, and children. Family therapist Dr. F told me that many of these women, who come to see her, had feelings of guilt.

«The women feel somehow in between the generation of their parents, who could not really adopt the new culture, and their children, who don't know anything about Iranian culture anymore.»

*(interview with Dr F, 2005)*

Dr. F told me that the divorce rate in the Iranian diaspora is very high, and that many of the divorced women had problems coping with loneliness. During my research I attended numerous meetings of Iranian women, many of whom were living on their own as single mothers. Still, in talking to them, they referred to the family again and again as an important source of identity. Consequently, women view divorce as a failure, as it disrupts family traditions. While Iranian women in Berlin tend to stress their independence, and their personal narratives emphasise how they questioned and eventually vanquished traditional values, Iranian women in Los Angeles stressed the importance of the family and of family values, a tradition they want to continue. Still, all the women I met with worked fulltime and were committed to their professional careers, meaning they did not define their role as mothers and housewives only. I observed a certain «cultural gap» between the two generations of Iranians. Many of the young women I met experienced the tension between a Hollywood-style celebration of the body, which is very dominant in Los Angeles, and the conservative values upheld by their families. Often, the parent generation wanted to convey some Iranian culture to their offspring to counterbalance the US culture surrounding them.

Satareh Farman Farmaian, the founder of social work in Iran, who died in 2012, at about 90 years of age in Los Angeles, told me that during the 1980s many Iranians came to see her and told her that their children could not understand why they had to leave Iran and live here.

«They had big houses and a swimming pool in Iran, and the children remembered that. The families lived a very rich and privileged life. Of course they lost certain privileges when they emigrated. The children accused their parents to be responsible for having lost all these things. They just did not know better. They were children.»

*(interview with Satareh Farman Farmaian, 15.10.2005)*

Additionally, the powerful tensions between the US and Iran, triggered by the hostage crisis of the early 1980s, had the effect that many Iranians gave their children English names in order to hide their identities and avoid negative identification with Iran. The one-sided media coverage in the US had an impact on young Iranians

living there and who had never seen their parents' home country. Shirin, a 25-year-old Iranian student who came to New York for an internship at the United Nations, put the Iranians of her generation into two categories:

«There are two major types I have met. First, people of the generation who was born in the USA in the hostage crisis, during the time of Iran and Irak war. I have seen young Iranians here who don't want to learn the Farsi. They have changed their names or the parents gave them English names. So they don't go to school with a «weird» Iranian name. The other group of people of my generation are the ones who want to connect with the Iranian culture. There is a very strong diaspora emerging from my generation here. Some people of my generation started to become more interested after high school. They think: My name is Sam, but I don't look like a Sam. They start to learn Farsi or learn how to cook Persian food. In my eyes, why young Iranian-Americans want to either connect with Iranian culture or not, has also something to do with the place they live in USA. Let's say if you live in L.A. it is much easier to be Iranian, because you have more Iranians and Iranian live there.»

*(interview with Shirin, 2008)*

Shirin's statement sums up a number of important aspects about Iranian-Americans of her generation, namely, on the one hand, that the second generation was born during a time of conflict between Iran and the US – something that influenced their socialisation and made many deny their Iranian roots – and, on the other, the question of population density, which, in certain areas, made it easier to continue with and transform some aspects of Iranian culture.

One young Iranian woman, active with the NIAC (National Iranian American Council), was critical of the fact that many in the Iranian diaspora showed little political commitment in the US, thus sidelining the Iranian-American community. According to her, the Iranian diaspora needed a political voice in the US, especially as it represented one of the wealthiest and most influential business communities: «The African-Americans, the Mexican-Americans, they all are politically very active. The Jewish diaspora is politically very strong. Where are the Iranians?»

While she herself spoke only little Farsi, she explained that this was the reality of the second generation and that, as Iranian-Americans, they needed hallmarks other than the language. The generation of daughters of those women that left the country following the revolution has no common identity through socialisation in Iran, nor any collective memories. This became very clear in what a young Iranian student told me, who had moved from Iran first to Boston and then to New York:

«On a social very personal level, it is not easy to relate to them (Iranian-Americans), because we are just completely different. We look like each other,

we might have both an Iranian name, but usually the American-Iranian person in my age is just like a foreign person to me. So if I make friendship with them it is like making a friendship with a Canadian or European person, I don't feel right away familiar only we have both an Iranian background.»

(interview with Shirin, New York, 26 August 2008)

## The International Iranian Women's Conference

One of the many important events where Iranian women can get together is the International Iranian Women's Conference, organised annually by the Iranian Women's Studies Foundation (IWSF), and taking place in Europe, the US, or Canada.<sup>1</sup> The conference was initiated by Golnaz Amin who lives in the US.

The IWSF connects Iranian women from around the world and aims to counter male-dominated narratives about Iran with female interpretations and perspectives. The conference is thus a portal into a transnational space where women may tell their stories, discuss, and negotiate.

Each year, the US-based Iranian organising committee collaborates with Iranian women's organisations in the respective city where the conference is to be held. Hundreds of Iranian women from around the world attend the annual three-day meeting. The event combines elements of an academic conference with political and cultural activities and offers attendants the chance to get to grips with their past.

The introductory note to the programme of the 15th International Iranian Women's Conference addressed the challenges posed by the event's transnational scope, namely, to satisfy the diversity of positions, views, and approaches of the women, many of which already get together during the preparatory stages.

«Last year, at the end of the London Conference, we had to face this question: are we capable to undertake the task of organising the 15th Annual Conference of the IWSF in Berlin? We were of different social and political backgrounds and had different approaches to problems and conflicts, both in Iran and the world we are living in. So, we looked at each other, paused for a while and then extended our hands towards each other.»

(Amin 2004, p. 7)

During the conference, the women mentioned above will meet in person, among them political activists who claim that they are «still fighting the fight» and academics from New York who promote gender studies; here, women, who have resumed regular visits to Iran, will debate exiled feminists about whether or not to visit the country as long as it still is an Islamic Republic; reformists will make their case

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<sup>1</sup> Since the attacks of 11 September 2001 the conference can only take place in either Europe or Canada, as travelling to the US has become to onerous for Iranians.

for gradual change, while others demand the overthrow of the regime and argue that there can be no dialogue with thugs. The second generation of young Iranian women uses the «second generation panel,» which was introduced a few years ago, to address their own experiences, concerns, and issues – such as the generation gap between them and their parents. For example, a speaker from Iran reported about pre-marital sexual relationships and how they are being tabooed by Iranian families and society in general, while young women, who have grown up in Germany, talk about their desire to visit their parents' home country – although their parents are barred from doing so. Many describe the actual encounter with what had been nothing but an imagined home country as an often ambivalent exercise of how to deal with projections and realities. Each year, the presence of speakers from Iran leads to debates about how Iranians in exile or diaspora may relate to those living in the home country – and vice versa. These encounters reflect the ambivalent nature of the relationship many women have with their country because of what they went through during and after the revolution. For women from Iran, the public nature of the conference poses problems as they do want to be able to return home after the event, yet are faced with an audience unwilling to be censored and that demands a frank debate. Thus, speakers from Iran will reiterate that they are unable or unwilling to answer certain questions, as this would impede their return back home. On top of that, Iranians living in Iran and Iranians living abroad tend to have different priorities and agendas.

The event's atmosphere is intimate and volatile at once. During the 16th conference, titled *The Status of Iranian Women in the Past 25 Years: Peace initiatives, human rights, political participation, careers and gender exploitation*, tensions boiled over when a speaker from Iran put on her headscarf when taking the stage, something a majority of women in the audience saw as a provocation. In her speech, this speaker discussed the biological differences between the sexes, which led other women to disrupt and criticise her. In reaction, she accused the majority of women present of shirking their responsibilities by living outside the country – a charge that reduced some in the audience to tears. The outrage reached such a level that the speaker had to flee the podium. Afterwards, some participants told me that the language of the speaker in question had been a provocation in itself, as she used many Arab words instead of their Persian equivalents – a detail that, to them, pointed to her loyalist mindset.

The conferences appear to be adversarial and exhausting to all sides, as the participants are trying to find a common language and a way of discussing issues that reflect all the different experiences and viewpoints. Because of that, attitudes towards the event differ widely. Some Iranian women will not participate anymore because, to them, this kind of confrontation is not helpful. One woman stated: «That's not a forum where I want to participate anymore. The discussions are always the same and nothing is going to open up and change.» Others find fault with the way women treat

one another: «We never learned how to debate – as proven by the speeches and the Q & A sessions. Many will interrupt other speakers, raise their voices, and are just very dogmatic. This leads to nothing. First, we will have to become more tolerant and learn how to listen to others.»

However, the conference, which has been taking place for over 26 years, also shows that despite all the criticism there is a continuing need to discuss gender roles inside and outside of Iran. This also points to efforts of Iranian women to speak and act in ways that contradict the images produced by the Islamic Republic as well as by the West. In order to comprehend the consequences of how women deal with «Iranian community formation outside of Iran,» it is of great importance to get to grips with the transnational tensions between women and to work out clearly what it is they share and what makes them different.

For the women living in exile or as part of the Iranian diaspora, the country they left behind still is the main focus of their actions. Here, the term «diaspora» offers an interpretive framework that aims to comprehend the interplay and the tensions existing between women and to answer questions about the affinities and dissimilarities between different groups. These transnational spaces pose questions such as: Where do those women live – inside or outside Iran? What is their political status – are they exiled or not? Are those women who no longer live in Iran able to visit the country? – Which also leads to the question, who to trust and who not to trust. What experiences can I share – and with whom? Consequently, any answer to the question «How to be an Iranian woman in the 21st century?» is determined by shared experiences of the past as well as the present – and by the possibility to debate and bargain about this.

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# From Bridging to Building: Discourses of Organizing Iranian Americans across Generations

«We've got leaders here from our businesses and our schools, government, entertainment community and more as we celebrate Norooz. And I think it's so fitting that we are holding this celebration here today because one of my favorite things about the White House is how it is truly the people's house; a house that reflects the diversity of culture and traditions that make us who we are as a country. And Nowruz is one of those traditions.»

*Michelle Obama, Whitehouse, 21 March 2015*

This excerpt is taken from a speech given by the American First Lady at the Norooz celebration of March, 2015. This festive event celebrating the Iranian New Year is a new addition to the previous year's unique recorded Norooz statement by the US President. It also symbolically marks the gradually increasing official recognition of Iranian Americans as a significant community in the US over time. As the diaspora community in the US develops, and a new generation gains a hand in representing Iranian Americans, how do these developments shape the way Iranian Americans position themselves politically as a group? This paper traces some of the discourses used to mobilize support, and posits how they are changing and developing. Its assertions are based largely on fieldwork carried out by each of the authors separately in the late 1990s/early 2000s and in the early/mid 2000s in Los Angeles, California.

Compared to other diaspora groups such as the Jewish diaspora, the existence of Iranians in diaspora is quite recent. If the number of Iranians residing outside Iran – either in exile or as migrants – before the revolution of 1979 was in the tens of thousands, this number has reached millions after the revolution. There is no exact number of Iranian diaspora but speculations are around 4 to 5 million. The largest number of this group is located in the United States, mainly in the state of California. Southern California and in particular Los Angeles has been mentioned by many as the second Iran or «Irangeles» (Kelly and Friedlander 1993).

Iranians living in the U.S. can be considered as a very heterogeneous group based on religion, ethnicity and education. However, one thing that often tends to bring this group together is the image of success. Iranians are considered a very



successful group of immigrants and have been praised for their activities by various U.S. officials. Iranians find this image of success an essential part of their identity. In this paper we will argue how this image is constructed through the activities of Iranian organizations in the U.S. and how these activities in their turn are shaped and influenced by the context of American society.

The discourse of recognition used in the quotation above alludes to the professional success and cultural uniqueness of Iranian Americans. This aligns with discourses used by Iranian organizations themselves to mobilize support among «the community.» This has served as an important strategy in connecting Iranian cultural identity to American society. This strategy has been referred to in terms of a metaphor of «bridging» in research on Iranian American organizations (Ghorashi, 2007). This signifies how the image of success is used to form a shared identity that creates a bridge to opportunities, establishment, and rights in American society. However, as we argue in this paper, some recent developments signal a shift towards a new strategy of societal inclusion, one that emphasizes community «building» and has a different take on the efficacy of the collective propagation of an image of success.

## Early bridging and the beginnings of NIPOC<sup>1</sup>

NIPOC (Network of Iranian Professionals at Orange County) started its activities in 1986 as an informal gathering between friends, mostly engineers. Their idea was to create the basis for an Iranian community in the area in order to support each other in their work. They started networking and soon the organization grew. Mr. Mesbah, one of the earlier members of the organization, shared his ideas:

«In the beginning there were about 30–40 people who gathered in an informal way. We would talk to each other and prepare talks for each other. I remember one of my own lectures: «how to start your own business?» I explained the basics of starting a business in America.»

Later this initial goal became broader. It was around the mid 1990s that the organization started to celebrate large-scale cultural activities such as *Mehregan* (Persian Autumn festival) and Persian New year. There are several celebrations involved around the Persian New Year on 21st of March. Through these cultural activities, many more Iranians were reached. At this time, the organization had two aims in mind: to safeguard Iranian cultural heritage and to create a bridge between Iranian culture and American society. The assumption here is that promoting Iranian culture enables an act of «bridging» to American society.

The organization that started as an informal gathering of 15 people grew to have 300 active members in 2001. Membership in NIPOC is limited to professional Iranians. The definition of professional here is broad: it refers to Iranians with any

<sup>1</sup> Parts of the following paragraphs are based on earlier work presented in Ghorashi 2004, 2007.

kind of higher education. The Board of Directors ought to review and approve all applications. According to NIPOC's newsletter the main aim of the organization is to promote recognition of and to improve opportunities for Iranian professionals in Southern California. Although the majority of the members of the organization are first-generation professional Iranians, their activities tend to reach Iranian community as broad as possible. Also the organization did not remain as just a source for connections among Iranians anymore but had become a source for interaction with American society as well. Mr. Alinaghian expresses this point clearly:

«Through these gatherings we wanted to reach a larger crowd of Iranians here and to create a kind of solidarity among them. But also when we are with larger numbers it also has a bigger influence on the American society. They can know us better and also can count on us more. For example they have registered, *Mehregan* as one of the days in the city [of Irvine in Orange County – authors] calendar. When we can show that we are a strong community we can become part of the society even more. Then we make a difference and make it possible also for the new society to approach us. When we are not strong and have nothing to offer why should the new society accept us? Today, in our program, the mayor of Irvine and the chief of the police are joining us, because we have shown that we have something to offer, and we are important as a group for the city. The officials of the city support our activities very much. In the beginning they did not know who we were. For example, during the Iranian New Year celebration they heard from the Americans living around the Irvine Park that thousands of people went to the park and picnicked. They were afraid of fights. Later when they found out about our activities, they started to respect us for being able to organize such a big events. They told us that they had not seen 30,000 people gather in a park without a fight before. They now send us congratulations and support us in any way they can.»

The clear message from this quotation is the importance of the Iranian culture for different reasons. First, it should help Iranians to become a strong community. By being a strong community they then have something to offer to the American society. The reference here to «being strong» is not just about the numbers but also *the kind of culture*, which is mentioned. Both Iranian New Year and *Mehregan* are ancient Persian festivities. In this way, a reference is made to a pre-Islamic period in Iran, a period that is associated with power: Persian Empire. By emphasizing this side of Iranian culture, NIPOC distances itself from the Iranian Islamic regime, and the negative images related to it. But it also promotes a positive image of Iranian culture by relating it to the pre-Islamic era, the era of fame and power. In this way, the discourse of NIPOC on Iranian identity is a non-Islamic discourse of strength, wealth and power. This particular discourse of identity serves as an answer to the question above: «when we are not strong and have nothing to offer why should the new society accept us?» This discourse should show that Iranians are worthwhile

of being accepted within the American society. In addition to this particular discourse of Iranian culture, the image of success is also used to help in this act of bridging.

The image that NIPOC presents is certainly an image of success. First of all, it is about being an organization of professionals, emphasizing success through education. Second, it is «a strong organization» because it has the possibility to mobilize and organize huge crowds of people. Third, it is an organization with «class». The organization holds general meetings every first Thursday of the month in the prestigious Hilton Hotel in Irvine. The Iranians who attend the meetings are very well dressed, providing an image of upper middle class. During these meetings the first part of the program consists of a presentation of a newly started business man/woman to promote their business. At the second part of the meeting, successful professionals (read VIPs) are invited to discuss several issues. In one of the meetings in 1997 the then Iranian Co-Anchor of CNN World Report, Asieh Namdar was invited. In another meeting in 2001, the founder and executive director of Relief International, the Iranian Farshad Rastegar, was invited. During these meetings NIPOC does its best to keep up with the image of success: be it through the place that the meetings are held or the ways Iranians are dressed or with the famous Iranians who are invited.

## **After September 11th: becoming more of an American**

Shortly after September 11th there were several criticisms made against mainstream sentiments and official policies within the United States. Arab-Americans and Muslim communities living in the U.S. criticized the mainstream anti-Islamic sentiments that were growing in spite of the official statements against them. Radical intellectuals were also criticizing official policies introducing the concept of war soon after the attack. The position of NIPOC did not fall in either of those lines of criticism. Ms. Khosravani who joined NIPOC in the 1990s and was at that time the spokesperson of NIPOC told me the following:

«To show our support of New York, we also collected money for New York. We placed a two-page add in the New York Times, together with other Iranian organizations active in Northern California and on the East Coast. In the advertisement, we announced our sympathy with the American people and placed the name of our organizations to show that we Iranians from different places in America were supporting them. We did that because we believe that American society has to see the difference between Iranians in America and the Iranian government. We wanted to provide that voice because no more than 5 % of Americans know the difference between Iranians, Arabs, and others.»

Before September 11th, Iranian culture had to be promoted in order to show the worth of Iranians as a migrant group; an identity politics through difference. After September 11th the focus was mainly on sameness with Americans in different

ways. Iranians with their Islamic background could easily be associated with terrorism and become the target of hatred and isolation. This shift in identity politics meant less focus on the Iranian distinct cultural activities and more emphasis on the closeness of Iranian diaspora with Americans. This closeness with Americans meant strengthening already claiming boundaries with the Iranian Islamic regime, but also constructing new kind of boundaries such as the one with other Islamic communities in the U.S. (as it is mentioned in the quotation: Arabs).

The initiative of NIPOC such as the New York Times advertisement has been one of the attempts to re-affirm and emphasize sameness through showing solidarity with Americans.

On September 16th, NIPOC and other Iranian organizations such as Iranian Cultural Center of Orange County (ICCO), Students of Irvin University, Khayam Educational Group organized a meeting together with the City authorities of Irvine in which the sympathy with American people once again was emphasized. Around the same time NIPOC changed its name from «Network of Iranian Professionals of Orange County» to «Network of Iranian-American Professionals of Orange County». This meant an even more explicit sign of stressing sameness through a claim of being American, a different kind of American, but still American. This claim on a hybrid positioning was far from being just a political move. It had also to do with re-affirmation of an already existing sense of belonging and a place called home which was under attack.

For these Iranians the September 11th events gave their lives in America a new meaning. They felt even stronger than before that they were at home. This feeling is clear in the words of Mr. Alinaghian, one of the founders of NIPOC:

«NIPOC shows its sympathy to American society. We want to show that Iranians are with them and sympathize with them. We want to show that our side is with Americans. We do not consider ourselves immigrants anymore. After so many years, we are one of them. We consider ourselves Americans with Iranian backgrounds. We love Iran, but we did not come here to go back.»

All these sympathies and attempts did not seem enough when after 2002 several security bills and regulations were passed that concerned the life of Iranian-Americans. The first bill was meant to restrict Iranians to visit their families in the United States. The second was called «special registration program» of INS (Immigration and Naturalization Services).

Hundreds of Middle Eastern men (including many Iranians) who voluntarily responded to the program where arrested at local INS offices. In spite of their efforts to distance themselves from the Iranian regime, Iranians were forced to realize through these bills that they are considered to be a potential threat to the American society. The impact of this realization was diverse. The most immediate impact was on the sense of belonging. This is clearly observable in the second interview with Mr. Alinaghian in 2003 in which he talks about the impact of these events.

«Immigrations act has hurt many Iranians. Iranian community considered itself to be a better community and pro-American. As I told you before, we are here to stay so we have to follow the law and everything. When they asked people to come and register, people went there honestly. Then they realized that they were cheated, they arrested many people. This had a bad impact on us Iranians; we again became Iranians and Americans.»

Q: «*Do you think that this had an impact on the Iranian-American identity of Iranians here?*»

«Yes, I think that it was damaging.»

Q: «*What about yourself?*»

«I feel that after living here for 30 years I have not been considered to be part of this society. I am a foreigner who is working and living here. I do not feel peace of mind and security.»

This sense of disbelief was common among Iranians [...] These events made it clear that for Iranians, claiming America as home should go together with being alert and united as a group in order to respond to the political decisions in the country when needed. The new legislations made Iranians conscious of the fact that they are not strong enough when it comes to the national political issues in the United States. They may have been successful but they have not been visible enough to let their voices be heard. It is with this background that the National Iranian American Council (NIAC) came to existence.

## **NIAC and the moves towards Washington**

The rise of NIAC signals a boarder shift in prominent Iranian organizations towards Washington policymaking and legislation. The narrative of post-9/11 discrimination was the basis for another organization, the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA), to also vie for influence at the national level. Gaining recognition through local organizing around cultural symbols was seen as not being enough to fully protect existing rights and pursue collective interests.

NIAC started its activities in 2002 and the focus of this organization was not that much on Iranian culture but on the participation of Iranian-Americans in American politics and the media. Babak Talebi, a founding member of NIAC formulates the mission of NIAC in the press release related to its foundation on May 1st 2002, as such:

«Among Iranian-Americans, there are Fortune 500 Company CEOs, a large network of doctors, major players in the information technology revolution, thousands of university professors and world-class engineers, but our voices

are not being heard in the critical American civil society debates. We hope to empower Iranian-Americans to help them broadcast their voice, whatever position they may wish to take.»

The annual meeting of NIPOC in March 2003 included a lecture by Mr. Chegini, one of the members of NIAC. In his lecture, Mr. Chegini explains the reasons behind starting NIAC:

«We have different cultural organizations but none of these organizations have been able to present our voice in Washington. Because of this we started with NIAC, which is based in Washington. Another thing is that there are different organizations but they do not work together. If any community wants to be strong then they have to have unity. We really need unity now. For example now with this whole problem with INS we need to help to release all these people who are arrested. Because of this we want to work with all the organizations that are active. [...] This is one of reasons I am here now. We want to work together with NIPOC. Most of the organizations are locally oriented but do not have the say in the ways that the bills of law are passed. They do not know whether these bills are good for Iranians or not. For this reason we want to work together so that we can bring our ideas into Washington's debates.»

The objective of inclusively representing Iranian Americans within American society and politics remains constant, as does emphasis on success. However, this inclusivity and representation are predicated on contested meanings. In the case of PAAIA, although the organization has become increasingly vocal about US-Iran diplomacy since its inception in 2008, its key figures framed it's early decision to remain largely uninvolved in US foreign policy issues concerning Iran as a means of avoiding divisiveness along political lines. Some respondents commented that this approach was a reaction to the difficulties NIAC experienced, having been forced to continuously and publicly defend themselves (including with legal measures) against accusations of political sympathy for the Iranian regime.<sup>2</sup> However, PAAIA's attempt to frame themselves as broadly inclusive across political lines has, according to observers, not lead to inclusivity across socio-economic class lines. This concern was expressed repeatedly by respondents who, from PAAIA's beginnings, worked together with the organization and commented on the overemphasis on creating self-produced media representations of Iranians in line with standard images of success, rather than highlighting the need for support and awareness for topics such as racism, poverty, homophobia, and refugee detention affecting Iranian Americans. In 2008–09, second-generation student organizers at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) created programming around these problematics, and such

<sup>2</sup> For the latest on the long-running case see, *NIAC's Statement on Lawsuit against Daiholeslam* [www.niacouncil.org/niac-statement-lawsuit-daiholeslam](http://www.niacouncil.org/niac-statement-lawsuit-daiholeslam) (last accessed, 03/04/15)

themes were included in programming in second-generation, (graduate) student-led events such as IAAB's<sup>3</sup> 2013 Annual Conference on Iranian Diaspora at UCLA. This emphasis on acknowledging problems facing a diversity of Iranian Americans and building solidarity and support around them is also something the then-President of NIPOC, Nora Valenzuela spoke about in October of 2008:

«Iranians themselves also have stereotypes about themselves. They think they're all rich and successful. And all very chic. They're not. There are so many poor Iranians who live here now. And the reason I know is because as the president of NIPOC I get calls and emails from them all the time. They're homeless Iranians. They're women in shelters that I'm helping right now [...]. Just because you have a senator in Washington does not mean the perception of an American in Orange County is going to change about the Persians. You have to start grassroots. You have to start through community building. Yes, it's good to have a senator, but one senator in Washington is not going to change the political views nor – as a matter of fact, those who don't want to push the agenda may actually gang up on him and put him in a corner. But if you start at the grassroots and have community involvement and participation, and being part of the community, then it works its way up.»

A focus on building horizontal connections between Iranian Americans according to the needs of «the community» is central to what is being proposed here. These community organizers called for the need for analysis of complex causes for these problems, and the sharing rather than effacing of experiences of discrimination based on race and class, as well as gender and sexuality, coming from both inside and outside «the community,» as part of generating such understanding. (Trans-) Local, grass-roots organizing such as the Leadership Institute that IAAB established, offers summer leadership camps and other activities oriented towards youth. The increased emergence of this way of organizing suggests that initiatives mobilizing purely around positive publicity/public image management and/or political representation on the federal level would not be enough if not informed by such «community» work. One second-generation respondent shared her thoughts, in 2009, about the need for this kind of organizing. She expressed concerns about the lack of advocacy work being organized, for instance, to support Iranian Americans in their encounters with (Federal) law enforcement.

«Whereas Latinos and other communities have community-based organizations working with them, we don't have that. We're seeing an emergence of organizations who are interested in doing public interest work on Iranians in the community IAAB, PAAIA, but they're not community based. Their focus is not to help individuals [via legal advocacy] and galvanize community energy.»

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3 Iranian Alliances Across Borders

This respondents' comments reflect yet another sense in which the language of community-building is used; with reference to the need for legal support funds to help cover legal fees in cases predicated on racial discrimination.<sup>4</sup> A general discourse of «building community» is taken up by a wide variety of Iranian American organizations and the activities they put together. This discursive focus reveals a need for addressing and understanding the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that affect Iranian Americans across generations and on various levels, rather than mainly focusing on representing success. It is important, at this juncture, to place the shift in discourse that we have been discussing within the context of historical shifts in immigration dynamics and the ways these have been understood theoretically. This frames the cross-generational changes that have emerged with regard to racial positioning, as we discuss in the following.

### **American multi-culture: shifts in Iranian American race dynamics over time**

The history of immigration in the United States was closely linked to assimilation theory that has a hierarchical point of departure. The assumption is that a dominant culture (of the host society) exists in contradiction to a subordinate culture (of migrants). The assimilation theory takes a unitary standpoint that expects immigrants to change when they enter the host society, and to adopt the dominant culture. Migrants, with their assumed subordinated culture, were supposed to start at the bottom of society and gradually move up. By the end of the twentieth century, the diversity among new migrants had influenced a change in this kind of approach to migration in the United States (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996, p.17). Many new migrants entering the United States had higher education and specialized skills.

These «new» kinds of immigrants have challenged rather than adapted to their new society. Because of their high educational profile, they consider their migration a beginning point of communication and negotiation within the new society. For the most part, their compatible background enables them to start a new life within the host society with only minor adjustments required to language and diplomas received from their homeland. Their condition is to negotiate between their background and the new society they are entering. The change in the type of migrants who enter the United States has undermined the importance of assimilation theory in current immigration research.

Although this change of approach offers more space for recognition of the qualities of immigrants that allows the possibility of negotiation between them and the host society, it still does not imply that migrants are considered equal to the

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4 While this respondent mentions IAAB here, we interpret this not as the respondent suggesting that IAAB does not do community organizing work. Rather, it points to the respondents' concern that community organizing should also include advocacy work in particular cases. In the interview, this (funding and infrastructure) is something she pointed out is lacking as yet among Iranian American community organizations, in contrast to other minority groups who have comparable experiences with the practices of law enforcement agencies.



members of the host society. «The same proficiencies and skills yield better rewards for whites than for immigrants [...] Yes, the high-skilled immigrants are doing well, the argument goes, but having run into a glass ceiling, they do not do as well as they should» (Waldinger & Bozorgmehr 1996, p.20).

Nevertheless, a more differentiated view on migration has replaced the assimilation standpoint with one that considers the diversity of migrant communities as being part and parcel of American society.<sup>5</sup>

The second important factor that contributes to this differentiated notion on immigration has to do with the ways in which discourses on American national identity are constructed. These discourses are partially related to what Behdad calls «an ambivalent concept of the «nation-state» in which «[d]isplacement is the precondition for the formation of national consciousness in the United States. [...]» In short, exile and displacement are not the opposite of nationalism, but the necessary prerequisite to imagining a national community in America» (Behdad 1997, p.156 and p.158). Following Behdad's argument, the concepts of displacement and immigration are an essential part of the US discourse on the nation and national identity. Yet, the approach toward immigration is ambivalent. On the one hand, displacement is a legitimate aspect of the discourse on national identity. On the other side exists a strong sense of protecting the national boundary against immigrants (van der Veer 1995).

Thus, it is not so much the immigration policies in the United States that make America an «immigrant country» but rather this ambivalent concept of the national identity that creates space for difference as it allows those displaced and exiled to be part of an «imagined national community in America.» In other words, the ambivalent notion of national discourse in the United States has made it possible for the displaced to claim their part of the pie within the national discourse about American-ness.

The third important factor in the construction of American identity is that it is as Stratton and Ang (1999) call it «a design through ideological means» instead of «cultural means». Being a good American is then about respecting the universal, abstract ideals and values such as democracy and freedom. «In the first place, being American is not primarily defined in terms of specific cultural practices and symbols (such as love for baseball or hotdogs), but in more abstract, idealist terms. As Franklin D. Roosevelt expressed in 1943: «Americanism is a matter of the mind and the heart; Americanism is not, and never was, a matter of race and ancestry. A good American is one who is loyal to this country and to our creed of liberty and democracy» (Stratton and Ang 1998, p.144).

By not defining American identity culturally, a space is created for culturally heterogeneous American identity based on common universal values. This emphasis on common ideals instead of common culture is essential for the existence

5 It is important to keep in mind that certain regional differences impact the way the differences are accepted. California is one of the states of the United States where the differences are most visible and where acceptance is much higher.

of *hyphenated* American identities, which finds one of its many expressions in self-identification as «Iranian-American». Research on Iranians' identity formation in the Netherlands substantiates the importance of national discourses. Here, however, the discourse on national identity and «Dutch-ness» operates on the basis of cultural belonging, excluding those with different cultural «roots», and making multiple/hybrid identifications and positionings much more «problematic» (see Ghorashi 2003b).

However the claim of hyphenated identities by migrants themselves in the context of the United States is related to another factor as well, which is the history of the civil right movement in the United States. In particular, the extensive and long-lasting struggle of African Americans in the United States has made an important contribution toward the heterogeneity of national identity, because it not only emphasized and safeguarded their difference in the search for their «roots,» but it also exerted a strong claim for their American-ness. As a new generation comes of age, and not only enters existing Iranian American organizations, but also sets up and expands their own, we see that the meanings of success, inclusion, race, and multiculturalism are in a state of flux for this group. As a wide backdrop to this dynamic, the character of racism in the US also undergoes constant change. The tendency of immigrants towards assimilating into «whiteness»<sup>6</sup> appears to be giving way to appeals to the legacy of the civil rights movement, and the mobilization of (not only cultural but also racial) difference is used discursively in circles of relatively young, Iranian American progressive academics and cultural producers.

## Complicating what it means to be a good American

These critical voices point out that non-cultural means of being American produce various kinds of exclusion, based on race and the level of success and wealth. This makes the position of African Americans and Mexican Americans quite different to that of Iranian Americans (see Pérez and Behdad 1995). The fact that first generation Iranian Americans are categorized and mostly claim to be white Caucasians have given them some racial privilege in the US. Also the level of education and social background gives this group a plus within a society in which success is essential. However even when there are other sources of exclusion there is a heterogeneous basis for national identity which makes the definition of «a good American citizen» not one that is culturally exclusive and only related to white, Christian Americans. The inclusion of difference within American national identity makes space for various ethnic identities. Most importantly, it creates space for the

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6 Nilou Mostofi has discussed the tendency of Iranians living in the US to alter their physical characteristics into a «whitened» form, through plastic surgery, contact lenses, removal of body hair etc. and through self-identification as being white, in order to escape discrimination by the «white majority», and as a strategy for assimilation and socio-economic success. See Mostofi 2003.

existence of multiple identifications. It allows one, for example, to be both American and Iranian.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, as the second generation comes of age in a post-9/11 context, it becomes increasingly clear that it is not so much culture that is at stake here but racial difference. While the first generation has remained relatively silent about the racial discussions in the US, the second generation takes a clear stand in that regard (Alinejad, forthcoming). Rather, racialization as Middle Eastern, non-white, and Muslim, is a process that draws new boundaries of inclusion and exclusion that are being negotiated through new discursive strategies in young intellectual pockets of the diaspora. American-ness is being formulated as much more than success and cultural uniqueness. Being American is increasingly also being defined as a continuation of a unifying history of struggle for equality.

Taking issue with this image of success and wealth means challenging the prominent strategy of assimilation that was initiated by the first generation and still characterizes many of the representations of Iranian Americans (especially in LA and other parts of Southern California). Bridging alone is being problematized and reflected upon. To where should a bridge be built? (Upper-)middle class, straight, white America? Should there be multiple bridges or paths built to inclusion? And is claiming and having minority status in the US a valid and preferred route of inclusion? These are the issues that discourses on organizing and defining «the Iranian American community» in the US face from the bottom-up.

The second generation is playing a noticeable role in changes in this regard, through their cultural production, scholarship, student organizing, and participation in political and legal bodies. Critical second-generation voices are well positioned in the community, highly educated and skilled, and are engaged and engrained within and familiar with the institutions of American society (Alinejad, forthcoming). The ongoing shift towards a discourse and a project of community-building as discussed here can be argued as signaling a new approach to organizing Iranian Americans, one that is still niche but nonetheless influential given the high societal potential of these young scholars and community leaders. That is, organizing Iranian Americans seems in these instances to be oriented around approaching the inequalities within the community from a perspective of solidarity, and on the basis of a shared position as an «othered» minority, rather than only through an approach that is limited to networking based on common interests such as professional development or electoral influence.

7 In her research on the political involvement of Iranian Americans in the United States, Tahmasebi (1997, p.44) shows that the majority of her respondents identified themselves as Iranian American. See also the intriguing collection of writings by Iranian Americans in Karim and Khorrami 1999.

## Conclusion

In our essay we have tried to show the historical changes and generational differences of the narratives of Iranian Americans in California. Although their history of migration to the US is not that long, the comparison of the first and second generation Iranian Americans shows interesting shifts and differentiated generational positionings in the last decades. For the first generation Iranian Americans the connection (bridge) to the American context seems to have been the major priority. The stories of success and the celebration of Persian heritage have been used as two sources of connection to the new society. From the turn of the century political awareness of the US context is added to this pattern. Yet, the second generation seeks alliance with the critical voices in the US questioning this rather a-political positioning of the first generation. In their quest for belonging they position themselves in the anti-racist discourses inherited in part also from other minority groups who have had similar (other Muslim and Middle Eastern minorities) or more embedded (African American and Latino) histories in the US.

We have shown here that important elements of the strategy of building bridges between the Iranian American immigrant minority and the majority society are still present, but that these appear to be shifting focus to a more diverse set of channels to inclusion. Furthermore we have argued that the role of «building» connections *within* this minority group signals an emergent search for grounds for solidarity *between* different demographics of Iranian Americans. Sketching a political agenda in this context moves beyond claims to success as a model minority to include a broader and deeper degree of institutional engagement by Iranian Americans within the society in which they live. For the second generation, the experience of post-9/11 discrimination, exposure to other racialized minority groups through contact through curricula and social and activist spaces of higher education institutions, and *de facto* cultural integration into the society in which they were born, means that new discourses and positionings become appealing and necessary for reproducing and organizing a notion of Iranian American-ness in the contemporary US.

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# Being Iranian today<sup>1</sup>

Around 250 years ago, in Letter 30 of his literary work *The Persian Letters*, the renowned French philosopher, Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu portrays a Frenchman who asks a voyager from the Orient who had become unrecognizable to his acquaintances since taking to dressing in the European fashion, «How can one be a Persian?». Some three centuries on, Montesquieu's question continues to remain a most pertinent question for all Iranians inside and outside the country, and will remain so as long as we wrestle with the nature of Iranian culture and identity. French writer Ernest Renan once said that «a nation is a soul and a spiritual principle». Now the question is what constitutes Iranian soul and spiritual principle? In his lessons on «Philosophy of History», Hegel deems the ethnic spirit of a nation (Volkgeist) to be that nation's spiritual essence, which constitutes the inner lives of that nation. The inner life and existence of every nation, meaning that nation's inner development, cultural, spiritual and ethical progression, which takes shape in a process known as a learning process, comprises lessons and experiences learnt by a nation throughout history. According to Hegel, the principle of development begins with the history of Persia. On the one hand, for a nation to achieve its quintessential truth, it must develop a certain grasp of its history. Each nation represents a way of life and a specific mode of existence, and that mode of being is defined in relation to what is «not» that ethnic group and nation.

A nation or ethnic group could only come to know itself once it has recognized other nations and ethnic groups. So the question of, «How can one be an Iranian», could be completed with the question «How can one not be an Iranian?» As with other nations with a great history, Iran and its people are self-centric. And all nations that are likewise self-centric consequently see themselves at the centre of the world (Cosmo Centric), and their history as the history of the world. Such a mental and political state has played a significant role in pre-modernist societies, such as Iran. That is why in their pre-modernist writings, Iranians barely exhibit any curiosity in the life styles and behaviour of others. The main discourse in Iran's pre-modernism is an inner-cultural discourse among individuals with shared existential, institutional and geographical experiences; in other words a shared identity.

Every human society moves at its own pace, and its knowledge of its own and the world's particulars of existence is associated with the understanding it has of itself.

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<sup>1</sup> The article is adapted from a lecture the author gave in October 2014 in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Hence, in a traditional society like Iran, our perceptions and actions have always been determined by the scope and boundaries of tradition. And when that tradition is not modernized and puts itself in a state of limbo, in other words alienating itself and not assuming any other form, then the moral basis of that society is destroyed. One of the problems we have in today's Iranian society is that we have distanced ourselves from our traditions. Owing to entanglement in political, social and mental crises, our traditions are being questioned. Yet we have not become completely modernized either. We are in a limbo resembling a tunnel through which all Iranians from every social stratum are in the process of crossing, but nobody knows where the tunnel ends.

The Iranian tradition sees the world as twofold, based on dualistic myths of demonic and divine or sacred and profane. Such an identity deems itself as pure and unadulterated and others as impure. An identity that considers itself pure, unadulterated, absolute, monist and soliloquist, is always engaged in violence. Why? Because it is constantly negating others. Thus, if we consider Persianness as a monist and purist ideology, in other words an ideology that seeks to purify national identity, then like many other ethnic groups we will suffer from self-inflicted violence while also inflicting violence upon other cultures and ethnic groups, culminating in self-destruction in the long term. But if we acknowledge that Persianness is defined in terms of not being an Iranian, in other words it is a fluid, composite and multifaceted issue, which is defined and determined in dialogue with other identities, we could conclude that Persianness is a multidimensional issue of which the Iranian diaspora is a clear example.

Dialogue among cultures is the principle governing life and existence of civilizations, which besides being political and cultural is also an ethical process, since it concerns values. Just as in the case of any other identity, the idea of defining Iranians as a homogeneous and pure group of people is inconceivable. In today's world, any identity must journey through a path of dialogue. Inter-civilizational dialogue is the prerequisite for dialogue with outside civilizations. How can a nation that has a selective and preferential attitude towards its traditions, thoughts and literature engage in a dialogue with other cultures? Therefore, the process of purifying identity and culture is akin to shutting all the doors and windows of a house, as a result of which the still air soon turns into a foul stench. Then again, in my opinion, national identities are defined in the light of political and intellectual discourses. And the degree of their being open or closed is linked to their direct contact with these discourses, in other words to how the issue is discussed among intellectuals, politicians and thinkers.

For the past century, we have been witness to two predominant ideological discourses pertaining to Iranian identity; one has been anti-tradition and the other anti-modern. Both have sought to homogenize Iranian identity, the political consequences of which have always been dire for the Iranians. They have either sought to destroy modernity or tradition. Both extremes have subjected Iran to an ideological and selective revision, disregarding part of Iran's history. They have resisted any ideas outside the two discourses and repudiated any sort of fusion of identity.

Some were infatuated with and some loathed the West; in other words, a duality of infatuation and loathing. In today's Iran, the consequences of the Islamic Revolution promoted the Iranian elite to review both concepts of tradition and modernity. Two major intellectual trends have embarked on this revision. One trend comprises the new religious intellectuals who believe it is possible to reconcile Islam and modernity, and the other, secular intellectuals who do not think that it is sufficient to merely revise religion but rather seek to acquire a more substantial understanding of the modern world. The arguments put forward by both Iranian intellectual groups have been very important for Iran and in relation to the process of Persianness.

This is because in addition to dealing with the political and philosophical dimensions of modernity, they also reflect on the issue of Iranian identity. The younger generation of Iranian intellectuals and elites in the second phase of the revolution has abandoned this polarization. Hence, there are no longer debates of East and West, old and new, tradition and modernity in the defining of Iranian identity. So the response to the question of «What does it mean to be Iranian?» does not entail anti-tradition, anti-modern and anti-Western sentiments. Today's debates among Iranian youth on the subjects of nationalism and Iranian lineage are no longer the same as the debates that took place in late 19th and early 20th centuries in Iran.

On the contrary, the debate that is currently important concerns «heritage». The concept of «heritage» has replaced concepts of tradition and modernity. Cultural heritage is the legacy inherited from past generations that holds cultural value. This legacy could be tangible (such as archaeological sites) or intangible (such as rituals and traditions of a region), maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations. The legacy inherited from past generations is invaluable in the study of human history. Physical or tangible legacy includes historical sites, artifacts, sculptures, books, manuscripts, artworks and machines. Spiritual legacy refers to the non-physical aspects of a particular culture, more often maintained by social customs during a specific period in history.

As such Iranians are neither totally traditional nor totally modern. Rather, when we speak about the heritage of Iran and Iranians, we have to speak of the three layers of the Iranian identity, the basis of which are anthropological, sociological and ontological, in addition to having both cultural and political dimensions. We are talking here of the pre-Islamic Persian, Islamic and modern dimensions. In other words, the identity of every Iranian is comprised of these three layers. One cannot remove one of the layers, expressing a wish to be a Shi'ite Iranian only, without having any connection with the times of Cyrus and Xerxes. Nor can one express a wish to be only a descendant of Cyrus and Darius, but have nothing to do with Shi'ite Islam, and pretend that all the existing mosques and the mystic tradition in Iran are superfluous and must be removed. And thirdly, we cannot negate the fact that at least in the past century, Iranians have been fascinated by and in confrontation with the Western – modern culture. As a result of which they have been to certain extent modernized and accepted or under the influence of the West. It is, therefore, the coexistence of these three poles that can form the present Iranian identity. Then again, it is the pre-Islamic ontological layer that in effect has developed the entire sense of Iranian



nationalism, which exists in every Iranian. When Iranians reflect upon the Arabs, Afghans, Japanese, Chinese and at times even Westerners, what they draw out from within themselves is what we can call an «Imperial Syndrome.» In other words, Iranians always maintain that they were a great nation with a great history; they had an empire and the others were primitive beings who lived in caves and ate lizards.

As regards to the Islamic identity, it has mainly to do with the traditionalism, eschatological values of Iranians and present superstitions through which Iranians view and shape their world. Last but not least, the Iranian view of modernity is in an extremely strange and peculiar state – one which Iranians incidentally share with Arabs and perhaps with the Turks and certain Central Asian countries – because it is a modernity that has not yet been subjectively processed and epistemologically internalized. One of the cultural catastrophes of Iranian society in the past 100 years has been to pit these layers against one another: Persianness versus the Shi'ite identity, the Shi'ite dimension of Iran against pre-Islamic Iran, or modernism versus the other two. It is, therefore, the coexistence of these three layers that plays an important role in the development of the Iranian identity, not the pursuit of religious and secular ideologies.

On the other hand, since we live in the globalization era, we also have to talk about the global heritage, and how various cultures, including the Iranian culture, could engage in a constructive dialogue. Global heritage and Iranian heritage have become two sides of the same coin. As such, the dynamism of Iranian spirit has an external aspect, which is globalization, contemporaneity and connection with the spirit and civilization of today's world. Thus, Iranians living inside and outside Iran have their fingers on the pulse of today's world. As a result, we need not only to stress the necessity of intercivilizational dialogue among these three layers but also to engage in a continuous dialogue with the global heritage. This attention to the concept of «heritage» is precisely a debate that goes back to the issue of the spirit and soul of Iranians in the process of globalization: in other words, how could Iranians think and act globally, and how the twain could meet.

Speaking about Iranian heritage, therefore, means to view oneself as global and think in terms of global heritage in order to counteract the anti-traditional and anti-modern ideological trends and their political, social and cultural consequences. In other words, Iranians do not need an invented modernity. What they need more than anything else is a culture of citizenship and law making. This is about eradication of violence, eradication of prejudice and political moderation. That is to say, Iranian identity must be viewed away from political interactions. Persianness, as an identity, is a legacy that could be built on and its epistemic foundations could be criticized. What today's world teaches us is that we could have our national identity, while also being a member of the global village. Being an Iranian today, therefore, is not a search for an ideal identity. Nor is it necessarily a return to the past. Rather, it is to think globally; in other words, to keep in step with the zeitgeist, the spirit of time. Being an Iranian today, at its best, is to interact with and be of benefit to all mankind; but also to help advance human civilization by being a contemporary of one's era.

# Long Distance Activism Looking beyond Teaching old Dogmatics new Tricks<sup>1</sup>

«[...] His political participation is directed towards an imagined *heimat* in which he does not intend to live, where he pays no taxes, where he cannot be arrested, where he will not be brought before the courts- and where he does not vote: in effect, a politics without responsibility or accountability.»

*Benedict Anderson (1998)*

Benedict Anderson's «Long Distance Nationalists» are hypocrites. They organise around a territory they do not occupy and do so away from accountability, risk of persecution and punishment. For young Iranians in Diaspora, and even many of their parents, this Long Distance Nationalist could well be the same Long Distance *Activist* of Iranian extraction that this paper addresses. Sleeping comfortably far from the reach of repercussions, they are thought to immerse themselves with aged, fixed dogmas, radical politics of youthful revolutionary beginnings, and are angered by thoughts of reform and slow change within the (Iranian) regime that so transformed their lives. Indeed For Iranians in Diaspora reflecting on the vast divisions amongst the «Iranian Diaspora Community» as a whole – although such a «community» is neither tangible nor permanent –, the rusty cog in the machinery of a «healthy» or «productive» Diaspora community are these very same long distance activists. Most often survivors of the 1980s «bloody decade», they appear to those who escaped with relatively less «accrued trauma» to still be stuck within that temporal moment.

In this model the well-oiled components of a disproportionately affluent Diaspora «mechanism» lament these survivors' presence, slowing them down, obstructing their collective progress with their sheer refusal to un-anchor from the past. Far from being supportive of other Iranians and working towards better overall conditions within their host states by investing in solidarity, these «rusty cogs» simply fracture the form of the Iranian body politic with their inflexible attitudes, unaccommodating beliefs and suspicious and restricted circles of inclusion within

<sup>1</sup> This article is adapted from the author's 2015 doctoral thesis.

any attempt at socio-political change, whether presented as being «host specific» or directed at change in Iran.

Such are the caricatures galvanised by media commentators, and repeated at dinner tables, by those who bemoan the fragmentation of the Iranian Diaspora as a whole and within specific regional hubs. These commenters compel Iranians abroad to «come together», to «put aside differences» and quite simply, to move forward, beyond the 1979 revolution that generated their current circumstances abroad. Trita Parsi, president of the National American Council, puts it in more simple terms. Beyond succeeding as individual units and becoming known amongst other minorities for their relative prosperity and elite status, it is time for Iranians (in the United States in his case) to «succeed as a community». He goes on to cite a lack of «democratic culture», something that Holly Dagues echoes in her piece for the Huffington Post «Diaspora Blues: Why the Iranian Diaspora in the United States Disappoints me». Cohesion, or lack thereof seems to be the common denominator in these commentaries. These notions are further compounded by academics writing on political activism from abroad and those who have written the histories of the revolutionary movement in Iran, as is exemplified by Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi in a paper whose title is self-evident, «Post-revolutionary Iranian exiles: A study in impotence» (italics, mine). The word impotence speaks much to the image of the long distant activist, of the survivor who seeks or sought to enact change from outside the territorial boundaries of Iran, where they were imprisoned or tortured or lost loved ones. All these negative sentiments regarding the long distance activist are best encompassed by my colleague Arash Davari's description, used as a basis for his Masters research on Iranian political groups, when assessing their modes of conduct. He cited the prevailing narrative of these actors amongst younger Iranians as follows: «once upon a time there was an older generation, influenced by out-dated ideological (specifically Marxist and /or Islamist) perspectives to such a degree that they still, to this day, remain stuck in the past – a past that is detached from what is actually going on not only in Iran but also in the host country that they currently reside in; that these people insist on talking about politics and, when so doing, talk past one another; and [...] now, their time has passed» (Arash Davari, presented 2012)<sup>2</sup>.

This narrative of rigid uncompromising and outdated dogmatics sits at the heart of my essay and my doctoral career. I contend that beyond encouraging people to simply «put aside» their differences, we rarely seek to understand why these differences are sites of such intense conflict. By imposing our Diasporic notions of democracy and «appropriate» political conduct we reduce these actors to Oriental despots in an instant, chastising them for not conforming to our requirements of «proper» engagement without acknowledging that theirs are a *learned* discourse. Nevertheless, I want to be clear before launching into the main body of this text – this is not a paper about cultural relativism and socio-political conduct.

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2 Paper presented at the Iranian Alliances Across Borders 2012 annual conference, currently unpublished

This is a paper about changing our conceptual lens and looking at these actors through the perspective of post-traumatic political activism. As such I seek to unearth the «public secret» (Taussig) of the 1980s in Iran as a means of examining the way that Iranians who most deeply felt its fury, its survivors, engage with the subject of their trauma through renewed efforts to hold the Islamic Republic accountable. More than this I present a brief conclusive example of the Iran Tribunal. The Iran Tribunal is a peoples' tribunal enacted by the survivors and family members of victims of the 1980s «bloody decade» in Iran. In 2012 and 2013 the Iran Tribunal held a Truth Commission (London, Amnesty International HQ) and a tribunal (Peace Palace, the Hague), respectively. Its aim was to bring to light this «public secret» of the violence of contemporary Iranian history. I will show how a movement cognizant of some of the themes I raise managed to overcome the obstacles that most regularly hinder socio-political movements amongst Iranians in Diaspora.

## What we talk about when we talk about the «chapi» exile abroad

The word «chap» (left), or «chapi» (leftist) amongst Iranians covers a wide spectrum of meaning, from groups with «a tendency to Marxism» (Behrooz, 2000, p.xi), to groups like the Mujahedin Organisation, who «freely borrowed from Marxism» as a part of their Islamic revolutionary rhetoric but «vehemently denied being Marxist» or even socialist<sup>3</sup> (Abrahamian, 1992, p.100). *Chap* encompasses a range of leftist beliefs therefore. Despite never holding power, the left, or these *chapis* (plural) had a profound national effect on political and intellectual history (Cronin, 2006, p.231; Behrooz, 2000, p.xi). Since they comprised the primary target for the Islamic Republic's violent consolidation of power, it is no surprise that they were amongst the millions that fled Iran during the 1980s.

Since the 1950s emigration from Iran has traditionally been thought to comprise of three main «waves». These are characterised by socio-economic factors and of course motivation for departure and whether this departure was «voluntary» or not (Hakimzadeh, 2006)<sup>4</sup>. The second wave of emigration is most reflective of my doctoral research informants' situation. This makes sense chronologically as they initially considered the political change a triumph. In fact they had fought for it, with many serving time in prison for their pre-revolutionary activities.

The largest and most densely populated hubs of this multiple and diverse Diaspora have also been the ones that traditionally inspired the most scholarly and media attention too. In 1990, 637,500 Iranians were cited in official censuses as living outside of Iran. 285,000 of these (almost half) lived in the United States (Bozorgmehr, 1998). As such the United States, and Los Angeles in particular grew to become one of the most iconic sites of scholarship on the Iranian Diaspora

3 Despite this the closeness of Mujahedeen and Fadayi ideology led the Pahlavi regime to call them «Islamic Marxists» (Abrahamian, 1980, p.10).

4 Since the time of Hakimzadeh's report in 2006 more waves have emerged, most notably a 2nd kind of «brain drain» as students fled following the 2009 election protests.

(Elahi/Karim, 2011). In those sites that were considered for research, rarely were the voices from within the multiple Diasporas actually included in the conversation about them. It was thus that a «monologue» between official and unofficial representations of Iranians abroad that is both produced *by* and as a reaction *to* the Islamic Republic of Iran itself was the norm (Shahidian, 2007). Growing ethnographic attention to *specific groups* within the Iranian Diaspora(s) worked against this grain and has reaped telling results in Canada (Shahidian), The Netherlands (Ghorashi, 2003) and Sweden (Khosravi) to name but a few. Questions of how these particular groups interacted with their host state and occupied hybrid, sometimes conflicting identities have come to frame current Diaspora discussions (Appadurai, 1996; Malkii, 1995).

As Mehrzad Boroujerdi notes – for nationalism theorists like Anderson «The Nation» is neither natural nor eternal, (Boroujerdi, 1998). Exile, as a poorly defined but oft used extension of nation (un)belonging, indicating a removal and marked absence from this «nation», reflects the messy and contradictory sentiments where temporal and geographic boundaries are imbued with perpetual blurring.

Exiles like the Fadaiyan «*chapis*» I worked with in Oslo and via the Iran Tribunal, make up a conflict-generated Diaspora *within* a Diaspora. Without attempting to cover the vast discussions on the structure and function of nationalism, we can see Diasporas as a most fascinating arena for the study of these themes through their multiple negotiations of the concept of «nation» itself. In the age of growing globalization and displacement we can comfortably accept theories of de-territorialised identities – nationalisms being an especially poignant example. We may no longer need to consult Appadurai to confirm our suspicions that national boundaries themselves are constantly becoming challenged. But in reality, in our everyday exchanges and in academic forums, above and beyond sympathy for Diaspora members there is thick critique of their long-distance activism. Considered together with the way that individual «long distance activists» are caricatured by the Iranian Diaspora itself, the sympathy soon runs dry. The Benedict Anderson approach might then posit that firstly, it is unethical to seek change in a country that you do not reside in, as you are in a sense an «inauthentic» national and secondly, in leaving your home state, you become irrelevant politically and practically.

As touched upon above, exile is messy; it implies a lack of closure, and a somewhat abstracted *desire* to return. The self-identifying exile will be sombre about the prospect of *not* doing so, distinguishing him from Anderson's brazen, hypocritical subject, something reflected in the dismissal of Diaspora activists as «inauthentic». But the exile conceives of enacting a change that may alter their own circumstances so that they or their children *may* return to live there. Or rather, so that they may engage with an Iran that more closely resembles that which they left behind. Their activism therefore is not disjointed with that of the 1979 revolution, which he/she enacted. There is continuity here. But this continuity is markedly more profound than just a nostalgic attachment to an Iran of pre-1979 grandeur.

## Rigidity of Narrative, Rigidity of Self

What was largely a peaceful revolution erupted in the muffled violence of the Islamic regime in the 1980s. While the newly established Islamic Republic cloaked much of the chaos under the war with neighboring Iraq, a climate of fear ensued. The bloody decade of the 1980s saw thousands of executions and disappearances, the records of which we are still compiling and vary from group to group. In fact aside from a brief «spring of freedom» the aftermath of the 1979 was intensely oppressive for the majority of those who enacted it and especially for the *chapis*. Ervand Abrahamian's «Tortured Confessions» situates the new brand of torture in the wider political imperatives of the Islamic Republic (IR) asking what it sought to do. Halleh Ghorashi's work deals primarily with the lasting effects of this torture and incarceration on such former activists. Taking insight from both we might garner some sense of how a life in exile might spawn a «survivor» mentality and also a sense of resisting the all-important recantation that was a particularly horrific kind of social death. The guards of the IR's prisons asked for televised recantations, signed confessionals and proof of deflection including the torture and killing of fellow inmates as *tav-aabs* (collaborator). These were the terms of *perhaps* being freed or excused from torture. They sought to create new, docile citizens (Foucault, 1977) and asked not that you say sorry for what you did, but rather that you be sorry for *who you were*. Their violence strove to transform the subject into silence and complacency. Violence is formative, affecting notions of identity and «what they are fighting for across space and time» (Feldman, 1994, p.4). Reading an enduring political identity away from these prisons and the violence of the IR is emblematic of the continuity of this struggle to resist transformation and the individual psychological impact of renouncing your revolutionary self. Territorial and temporal distance have not closed this chapter, many of the *chapis* we criticise for being too involved in the domestic politics of Iran, and for being too radical and rigid in their revolutionary ideas are still engaged in that very same encounter.

Humphreys describes terror as threatening the very principle of reality on which the established order depends. Terror as ongoing trauma poses the more profound challenge precisely because, unlike violence there is no end while Linda Green defines being «socialized to terror» as not implying either a constant state of alertness nor an acceptance of the status quo. It instead indicates a state of «low intensity panic» (Green 2004, p.186) that sees chaos «diffused» in the body and manifested in chronic illness and recurring dreams. In effect, she describes trauma like a disease that affects the body and in turn the social interactions of the carrier of such experiences. I find this to resonate strongly with how Iranians in Diaspora communicate the ideas about the Iranian revolution in public. Recalling Kimberly Theidon's description of survivors of the Peruvian internal conflict with stomach ulcers who shrugged them away on the basis that they had swallowed so much rage as to produce them was to me, familiar. My informant Behnaz<sup>5</sup>, on recounting the

5 Names have been changed for anonymity of subjects

scene where she searched for her brother's body in Khavaran would say, each time while recounting that scene «*I hear the crows. I still hear them.*»

She was speaking about the recurring nightmares that almost always featured many loud, shrieking crows in barren landscapes. She often relived the moment that she had to find Ali in amongst the corpses. Her brother Amir had also died in a high-speed automobile crash whilst trying to escape the revolutionary guards. He too had been a casualty of the revolution. But she said she had made peace with his death, that she felt he was able to rest in some degree of peace. Ali on the other hand still visited her in her dreams. «*His ghost is uneasy.*» she would say, which acted on her motivations to avenge him somehow, in her continued activism, her continued alliances to old affiliations. In her testimony at the Iran Tribunal, which I watched several times, she also mentioned the crows, she mentioned them pecking at the bodies. «*I hate crows*», she told me. «*I've hated them since then*». The present is still, in Nicholas Argenti's terms «heavy with the weight of past» (Argenti, 2008) and greatly informs social interactions, despite or perhaps exactly because of the lack of alternative platform for their manifestation in the public space. As academics and professionals we have become accustomed to the plethora of reporting on the structural causes and effects of the 1979 revolution, but rarely do we stop to consider how many of these histories speak to and about those who took part in and later suffered greatly for their convictions. *The fact remains that we have no collective history of the violence of the 1980s*, nor can we expect one by demanding that Iranians everywhere simply «put their differences aside» and change the target and shape of their political activism. The rise in numbers of (prison) memoirs (Abrahamian, 1999) is testament to the exceptionality of experience and the credibility of personal narrative above collective narrative amongst survivors. It speaks to relying on our own individual experiences and telling our own story, because we simply do not trust anyone else's account to include us or represent our trauma adequately.

## Ta'arof and Tea: Trust and Mistrust

Antonius Robben and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco claim that «[...] violence constitutes a study of basic trust in social institutions» (Robben/Suarez-Orozco, 2000, p.11). Considering the sheer extent of mistrust that exists between survivors as well as between them and social institutions, initiatives like the Iran Tribunal can be considered as a success simply because they happened. The phenomena of tavaabs (those who under pressure cooperated with their captors by torturing, spying and sometimes executing their fellow inmates), the idea (crucial) of IR spies infiltrating communities and gathering intelligence from their traumas, the age old anti-instrumentalist rhetoric which demands that each and every member of the team reveal who they were and are affiliated with and thus represent is still present and *ad nauseum*. Certainly, these components were at play during the Iran Tribunal too,

and were to some extent even exacerbated through the testimony-led process. In a now memorable exchange I recall the crowd reacting to a man who spoke about his time in Evin prison, reluctantly mentioning information about his ward, and very notably not mentioning the number – something that for survivor communities is incredibly meaningful. The woman sitting next to me leaned in and said «he must have been a *tavaab*. That's why he is embarrassed to reveal the ward number.» The people sat around us, listening to the man's harrowing experiences in prison nodded in agreement. It became clear that even during a truth-telling process (perhaps precisely *because* of this), the man's narrative was being scrutinised. It was obvious that there is a way to tell your story in these settings, each ward number, each cellmate you mention by name, each date connecting you and corroborating your experiences with another story, reinforcing your survival through credible means. Survival is not automatically entry into political groups. Since the phenomena of *tavaabs* is still quietly present within survivor groups, those who live beyond incarceration and torture while thousands of others perished are required to account for this survival.

In the same way there is a way to do politics within the survivor communities. They carry an exclusionary lexicon, rich in the symbolism of captivity and torture where many of them essentially grew up, in what Borojerdi refers to as the culture of «prison communes», with its own aesthetic and a hierarchy of trauma. The families of victims, which I will briefly address, are in a different position in terms of knowledge – they are the *consumers* of knowledge first and foremost – excavating the memories and experiences of the survivors to find remnants of their loved ones who have otherwise disappeared without other material traces. These two processes in themselves produce prestige and status within the realms of victimhood and activism. Exile politics' anti-instrumentalism necessitates notions of «purity».

To be «politically pure» is however immensely difficult. Working with «impure» political bodies or through «impure political practices» can render you contaminated beyond reversal. This sentiment is directly related to the previous point about recanting your revolutionary self. To have those rare prestigious, «pure» (due to the intensity of their loss and suffering and their current activism) political figures vouch for your project can breathe life into it, while to collaborate on it with an existing or former member of the Mojahedin e Khalq, for example, is instant political suicide. This is a house built of fragile components where every name and action implicates your present and past self.

A description of marginal peoples, as put forth by Mary Douglas clarifies this idea: «It seems that if a person has no place in the social system and is therefore a marginal being, all precaution against danger must come from others. He cannot help his abnormal situation. This is roughly how we ourselves regard marginal people in a secular, not a ritual context» (Douglas 1966, pp. 2, 26–29).

«Purity and danger» proposes that «dirt» or the impure is only such by association, encompassed through the notion of «matter out of place». In the Iranian activism context, political marginality is, as previously cited, most potent. With



this in mind, we can approach the case of the most «ritually impure» groups within an already «out-of-place» community of traumatised survivors of torture. Within a relative scale of political purity and impurity the Mojahedin-e Khalgh sit at the far end of such a scale, with other leftist groups fearful and unwilling to work with them within the Iranian Diaspora community abroad. This is due to their multiple associations with Islam, military efforts against Iran during the Iran-Iraq war, and the secrecy within their group<sup>6</sup> that is considered «cult-like». Problematic is that on the opposite extreme of this scale are the deceased left-wing revolutionary martyrs – pure in their presumed honourable deaths. This leaves the «other» surviving groups (uncomfortably) shifting places in the middle, constantly reaffirming their status as pure within a system that condemns political purity as impossible while alive. We see evidence of this in the way that political groups fragmented following the revolution. Martyred left-wing comrades were the banners under which new break off groups were established. This is also reinforced by the way that even prestigious survivors such as Mehdi Aslani used their testimony to express the «sheer luck» by which they overcame the period, constantly affirming that it was chance and not collaboration with captors or a lack of political resistance that led to their freedom.

## Conclusion

Post Traumatic Stress «stressors» are not limited to just shock. Stressors can traumatize by inciting guilt and shame, and not just fear (McNally, 2003, p.85). Surviving an event that saw thousands of executions and horrific ends is not simply a triumphant feat over circumstance. Those who survive are keen to explain their survival and maintain their integrity of self. This resonates strongly with Primo Levi's body of work and his survival of Auschwitz. As he comes to terms with his tacit pursuit of survival, which both maintained him and left him riddled with guilt he faces a paradox. It is as if his survival were indicative of a moral deficiency, a lack of dignity that death provided the absent with. By surviving he was haunted by guilt and feelings of betrayal. These are just some of the indicators we are used to seeing from Iranian long distance activists, but rarely do we connect them back to their personal traumas.

The Iran Tribunal emerged as a project for individuals who were directly affected by the «bloody decade» of the 1980s in Iran. Both survivors and the family members of the executed were amongst the founding members of this movement. Although initially modelled on the Russell Tribunals, which began in 1966 and aimed at investigating US war crimes in Vietnam, this was not a panel of foreign intellectuals examining the war crimes of a country they had no personal ties with. The campaign kept the formal, interrogative framework of the Russell Tribunals and the idea of testimony as central to fact-finding. To borrow once again from Benedict

6 A 2007 documentary about the Mojahedeen-e Khalgh, made by Maziar Bahari was aired by Al Jazeera and the BBC in 2007 and called (referring to the group as) «The Cult of the Chameleon».

Anderson – this «imagined» Diaspora «community» interacted over geographic and temporal distances online and then also in person; becoming «real» and discussing how to turn their ordeals into action. The progress was slow and steady. New members were enlisted, some left on the basis of political or personal differences, but most stayed. In June 2012 when the first Truth Commission phase of the Tribunal took place, around 200 people were members of the campaign, along with a meticulously appointed Steering Committee of legal experts and international judges. To many, even before The Tribunal went live it was the unity of 200 plus «ordinary» Diaspora Iranians from all walks of life over six years that remains the most spectacular achievement.

On March 15th 2013 Judge Johann Kriegler announced the final and reasoned judgement of the tribunal's two-stage process. Judge Kriegler provided the following description which I am paraphrasing for brevity. «People isolated in boxes sitting around a crowded room but each sitting in a little box and obliged to keep totally silent and to communicate with nobody not withstanding being surrounded by others. A form of torture [...] somebody said it was the coffin, others called it the cage [...] a form of torture that caused a breakdown in one's sense of humanity, one's sense of belonging to people, one's sense of being able to communicate with one's fellow human beings. One of the essential qualities that distinguishes human kind from any other kind of life on earth – this capacity to communicate. To be placed with others in torture and in pain and not being able to speak to them for days and weeks on end while you are sitting in the same place.»

This image represents the current conflict at the heart of the troubled political relations of activists – prisoners were kept in coffins in crowded rooms. So although hundreds were sitting in each room; the sensation of being blindfolded and made to sit in a small box in absolute silence made it seem as if they were all alone. Shekoufe Sakhi's testimony at the Hague proceedings described the moment that they forced her self to fixate on the sensation of being. She described, poignantly, holding her hand up and reminding herself, from beneath the blindfold, that she was a human being. These extended experiences of absolute solitude in their suffering provides a cogent parallel against which to reimagine the lack of collectivity amongst former prisoners of conscience specifically. My interpretation is that a singular, personal sensation of trauma, which is at times incompatible with that of those who may have been sitting in the very same room, thus emerges and solidifies. As mentioned above, Ervand Abrahamian documented the rise of the (self published) personal prison memoir amongst Iranians (2002); something I believe holds renewed poignancy with regards to these themes. Their stories are felt to be untold, singular, and exceptional and thus require a medium that honours these feelings and contributes to a cacophony of whispered narratives that both the Iranian national and international media's booming megaphones ultimately drown out.

The Iran Tribunal worked where others failed because it provided singular spaces for individual stories to emerge. It hushed the grand narrative, if even for a moment to allow for the witnesses to assume a place in collective history telling. There was a space created for men, for women, for ethnic Arabs, Kurds and Azaris.

There was a space put aside for the monarchist, the Mujahed, the Fadayi and every group in between. There was a space for the grieving mother, the parentless child, the widowed partner and the sorrowful siblings, and many more. Perhaps this is why the usual heckling and disorder of Iranian socio-political groups was noticeably absent. The multiplicity of experience was given a stage. The weight of shared trauma shattered feelings of exceptionalism.

The memory of the violence of the 1980s in Iran is buried in a shallow grave. It breathes beneath the surface of everyday interactions, rarely spoken of but often spoken through. Like the bodies in Khavaran, on the outskirts of Tehran where thousands were dumped by the regime, these experiences need to be exhumed, examined, mourned and laid to rest before we can begin to do as the commentators I cited ask us to do collectively – to «put out differences aside and move forward».

I end by coming back to the caricature of the Iranian long distance activist one last time. Throughout this paper I have suggested that the obstacle to Diaspora collectivity is not the unsavoury or antisocial seeming behaviour of the activists themselves as much as ill framed expectations for their collectivity. We should ask how does a person who reengages with the politics of their solitary personal trauma imagine a collective justice, before attempting to funnel their energies into new and different political projects.

If we shift our frames to understand their activism as continuity for an unresolved trauma and we exercise inclusivity and understanding as the Tribunal at times managed to do, then we will begin to see the collectivity that we so often lament as absent. Robben and Suarez-Orozco suggest in *Cultures under Siege*, that since collective violence does not act on a single scale it must be studied along the multiple planes that it affects us at – at the site of the body, the psychic and the socio-cultural order. Considering the collective violence that characterised the post 1979 period in Iran, I am left wondering why we continue to relegate this era to the realm of public secrecy, when what it needs most of all is a collective exhumation of the past.

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# Food, Narrated Dislocation and Diasporic Presence among Iranians in Germany<sup>1</sup>

*This paper looks at the culinary practice by Iranian émigrés in Germany as a non-discursive means of enunciation of their diasporic presence. The production and consumption of Iranian cuisine is looked at as the domain of action favoured by Iranian émigrés, because it displaces the tension-ridden narration of dislocation – the absence from home as victims of political repression. Based on ethnographic data collected mainly in the 90's from among Iranian émigrés in Germany the paper argues that the non-discursive culinary practice spared the émigrés' from acting as rights-bearing subjects – the identity they assumed in crossing the international borders – to account for their absence from home. Acting as rights-bearing subjects would have entailed the émigrés to publicly encounter their changed relationship with home as the site of both hierarchically organized privileges based on class, gender and race as well as of political repression. The reluctance by the émigrés to acknowledge, as the bearers and advocates of universal rights, a discontinuity in their identity was compensated by their resumed connection with home. This connection was geared to a continuity in their diasporic presence as a burgher – a member of the bourgeois social class formation. Instrumental in the assertion of continuity were members of the linguistic community of Farsi-speakers in diaspora. The paper focuses on how the rights derived from émigrés' membership of an association (Gesellschaft) of citizens are harnessed by them to recover their lost male privileges in an «authentic», home community (Gemeinschaft) where women are expected to serve their men with elaborate dishes.*

«Your question on life in exile touches on a sense of sorrow that is the sorrow of being away from the homeland. Perhaps this sense of being away from home is the men's feeling of losing their domination over women.»

*A male Iranian émigré, Germany, 2000*

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- 1 I would like to thank Resa Mohabbat-Kar for asking me to participate in this much needed transparency project. His useful comments made with a spirit of openness have been the characteristic feature of my exchanges with him throughout. My thanks also to my wife Pam for her patient engagement with my thought.

## Dislocation and narrative of identity

In the course of conversation in a German city in 1999 about dislocation and the role of music in articulating Iranian identity in diaspora a middle-aged Iranian man interrupted the flow of exchange with his Iranian interlocutor to frame diasporic identity in different terms. The man, a professional player of an Iranian musical instrument, who had lived for several years in Germany, and his interlocutor were hitherto discussing the continued mediation of shared musical tastes and sensibilities between performers and audience in diaspora as the means of connection with home. He cited a shocking encounter with another Iranian several years earlier when he was visiting a Canadian city. Looking troubled by the vivid memory of a humiliating experience the musician recounted how during the visit an Iranian woman addressed him and his companions as «wretched refugees» (*panahandeh-i-bad bakht*) when they were waiting to cross a busy road. The well dressed woman was among the passers-by who once she spotted the small group of émigrés shouted at them without provocation in Persian (Farsi) «you are wretched refugees» (*shoma panahandeh-yaei-bad-bakht*).

The interjection by the musician challenged the narrow scope of the question of identity in diaspora by his interlocutor who was mainly focusing on his role as a musical performer interacting with his audience. It widened the scope of the question to include other, tension-ridden aspects of his diasporic presence. In contrast with musical tastes and desire expressed through coded performance by players and their audience who were linked often with little use of words the encounter cited by the middle-aged man re-directed the attention of his interlocutor to a diasporic presence represented through words which set identities in conflictual relation with each other. The cited humiliation suffered by the musician changed the subject of his conversation with the interlocutor from a de-narrativised means of sharing music as a cultural asset towards the narrative of dislocation as the source of tension among Iranian émigrés. If non-discursive musical performance left muted the tension-ridden relationship the cited example of referring in words to dislocation forced it to the surface by providing a narrated account of dislocation. Accordingly, the musician once ending citing his experience, turned towards the interlocutor to ask in exasperation, «What do you say to that?»

The term *bad-bakht* (wretched) used by the female denunciator signified among Farsi speakers a damned personal situation struck by a misfortune so overwhelming that it virtually eliminated hope from the person's perspective. Explicit in the woman's conduct was the attempt to publicly distance herself by dis-identifying herself as a refugee (Sanadjian, 2000). Implicitly, however, she admitted her lack of recognition of refugees as victims of political repression by the state from which they had escaped. Instead she portrayed refugees in her denunciation as those with impoverished economic means to sustain their presence in the foreign country into which they had entered. Her denunciation was designed to point out the lack of ground for the poorly endowed outsiders labelled as «refugees» such as the musician and other Iranian passers-by to occupy the public space in the city with the

expectation to use it in a normal fashion. The absence of «refugees» from home in the woman's remarks was linked with their presence in exile through their personal economic fortune. Thus, diasporic presence was checked not against the political pressure that had been brought to bear on émigrés like Iranians at home, leaving them with little choice but to make an exit from it, but in terms of the adequacy of the economic means in their hands to sustain their presence in diaspora. With her remarks, the woman refused to recognise the trouble at home as the main drive behind Iranians' presence in diaspora. In her narrative of dislocation, she therefore avoided to articulate the tension ridden relationship between the past and an uncertain future in a narrative of identity that could provide Iranian émigrés with a shared destiny. In the absence of such a narrative the émigrés could only be identified, disconnected from their past, solely with reference to insufficient means – primarily economic – available to them that failed to make their presence in diaspora sustainable. On this economic measure refugees who had to resort to the universal right of the refugee in order to enter a foreign land could only be labeled as «wretched».

## Postponed presence

The woman's use of the Persian language – Farsi – indicated her presumption about the national origin of the group of Farsi speaking passers-by she had chosen to denounce as «wretched refugees». The use of ordinary Persian made accessible to the female denunciator the «stock use» of words such as *panahandeh* whose users communicated with each other as members of the «linguistic community» of Farsi-speakers. The communication between the users of words such as *panahandeh* in their accustomed usages was instrumental in defining the linguistic community in social and cultural terms (cf Ryle, 1963, p.109; Sanadjian 2016). Thus, the Farsi-speaking members of the linguistic community not only drew on the normal – official – meaning of the word *panahandeh* (refugee) but also its «suggested» one. The official meaning of the word *panahandeh* (refugee) as a stateless person conveyed a severed or suspended relation between the person and the state into which he/she had been born. It signified the recourse to the international right of the refugee that allowed a stateless person to enter and settle in a country like Germany where the rights of Man and the Citizen were incorporated into its constitution. As a right bearing subject a refugee epitomized the interrelated request by the citizen-subject for liberty and equality (Balibar, 1994). The identity of an émigré was framed in legal terms once he/she sought to be identified as a refugee (cf Hall, 1990). Consequent on the identification of an émigré as primarily a right-bearing, legal subject was the call for him/her to subordinate his/her particularised identities based on class, gender and race to the exercise of universal equal rights (see Hegel 1967). Thus, the émigrés' demand for universal and equal rights as a refugee was predicated on his/her representation as primarily a legal subject. The status of the refugee is indicative of and closely linked to the rights of the citizen. Distinct from the subject whose will was subjugated to that of his/her ruler a citizen is identified by the ability to exercise his/her free will in making the law by which

he/she is ruled. The collective efforts through which such freedom is exercised and the equalizing function of the law make freedom and equality the essential ingredients of modern citizenship. The citizen ceases to function when his/her free will becomes subordinate to the whims of a ruler – with or without a divine mission. The recognition of the agency and autonomy of the citizen by émigrés on which the normal – official – meaning of the word *panahandeh* drew was a necessary step in demonstrating the excess a refugee had suffered or is likely to endure at home. Many Iranians, including the musician and his questioner, had asked to be identified as a refugee through recourse to the agency and autonomy of the citizen-subject when entering a foreign country, not as a visitor or in pursuit of business or even as a student but as a persecuted person or one fearful of the violation of their rights as citizens at home.

Alongside standing for the identity of a legal subject endowed with equal rights the term *panahandeh* was also invested with the «suggested usage» in the linguistic community of Farsi speakers to convey the loss of home. The vernacular term's double meaning derived from the severance of ties with the state into which the émigrés were born and their abandonment of home. Whereas the severed ties brought to them the prospect of exercising equal rights in their new country of residence, something that did not exist back at home, the abandoned home denied them access to privileges, as opposed to universal rights, that had been left intact. The vestiges of the privileges at home which were maintained by a hierarchically divided space based on class, gender and ethnicity were still discernible among the émigrés who could effectively resort to the notion of equal rights to mediate between them in exile. A female Iranian in a southern German city where she had lived for a number of years could hardly conceal her sense of surprise when she learned in the early 1990's that the author had done some research among the ethnic group in western Iran to which she originally belonged. She told him shortly afterwards that she did not disclose her ethnic origin to other Iranians fearing they were likely to make her the object of their ridicule.

The dual – official and accustomed – usages of the term *panahandeh* in the linguistic community of Farsi speakers in diaspora was harnessed by its members to emphasize alternately their present rights and the lost privileges at home. Placing emphasis on the accustomed meaning (loss of home and privileges) was facilitated by the postponement and dismissal of the official meaning (bearers of universal rights), and vice versa. An Iranian volunteer in a south German city who had helped Iranians for some time with their application for «asylum» mentioned in 1991 the stark contrast he had noticed among the Iranians he had helped to prolong if not perpetuate their presence in Germany. He said the Iranians consistently turned up in the gatherings and demonstrations organized to highlight the violated rights of refugees and others up until the time when they were granted permission to stay. Once their official entry into German polity was secured these refugees, the volunteer pointed out, stopped contacting him or showing interest in the plight of those whose rights had been violated. It was also noticeable that Iranian émigrés usually refused to wear the public persona of a refugee once they



were granted official permission to stay in the country whose boundary they had crossed. In the play of the meaning of the word *panahandeh* the official meaning was deferred by émigrés in order to make the other – the accustomed one – significant (Hall 1990). The postponed official meaning served to facilitate émigrés' «homeward» journey, which was mediated by the suggested usage of the word emphasizing the loss of privileges and home. It was a paradox of crossing international borders by Iranian émigrés that from the moment they gained access to the state in which they were recognized as bearers of rights their recovery of lost privileges at home began (cf Said).

Thus, when filing their application to stay in the country whose border they had crossed, Iranians drew on the narrative of escape from home due to political persecution and repression in order to represent themselves as refugees. However, individual stories of the violated rights were largely kept private by Iranian émigrés who were most reluctant to share it with others even if the violation of rights in Iran was a public global knowledge. This presented Iranians with a dilemma: although Iranian émigrés insisted at the point of entry into their host society to be officially registered as victims of political repression at home, they noticeably refused to act in public as a witness of such repression and to be publicly identified as a refugee. It was the shared reluctance among Iranians in diaspora to be identified as a *panahandeh* to which the female denunciator drew to represent herself as not one of them – the «wretched refugees». Significantly the outcome of the émigrés' aversion to their public identification as a refugee was their lack of participation in compiling a collective narrative of identity, as this identity construction inevitably had to assign the dislocation and the political causes behind it a prominent role. Only in intimate circles and safe private spaces did Iranian émigrés engage with tension-ridden narrations of dislocation, and the political repression forcing them into diaspora. When the musician interrupted his interlocutor who was focusing on music as a non-discursive means of propagating Iranian identity he was seeking to point out that the non-discursive device was a substitution for a narrative of dislocation that was feared spurring Iranian identity towards fragmentation.

## Burgher vs citizen

The entry into a western country by Iranian émigrés as refugees following the political upheavals at home faced them with conflicting identities even after the question of identification had been officially settled (cf Balibar, 2002). The identity conflict resulted from émigrés' reluctance to publicly engage with and bear witness to the reason behind their absence from home and their presence in diaspora – the political repression in Iran. This reluctance furthermore diminished their role as mediators in the objectification of a notion of universal rights, which required their continued agency and acts of solidarity in the political sphere. Such mediation enabled émigrés to join others – Iranian and non-Iranian alike – as citizens and members of an association (*Gesellschaft*) of rights-bearing subjects through a shared quest for equality. Having refused to take part in the political construction

of identity by acting as witnesses of political repression, advocating for equality and solidarity, émigrés were left to organize their social relations in diaspora operating as burgher (bourgeois), striving and negotiating recognition for bourgeois identification, distinction and class position (Sanadjian, 1995). A burgher is defined here, following Hegel, as the agent of civil society whose primary concern is to pursue his/her own interest by using the needs of others as the means to satisfy his/her own. The rationality that governs the action by burghers is «the suitability of means to their ends». In order to secure their social presence and reproduction in the host society, Iranian émigrés had to embrace the rationale of the modern market agent, drawing on each other's wants and caprices as the means of satisfying their own particularised wants and needs as members of the bourgeois social class (*Bürgerliche Gesellschaft*).

These needs for the most part represented continuity between émigrés' absence from home and their diasporic presence. Drawing on others' needs as the means of asserting their own class identity was a logic Iranian émigrés were well accustomed to, as their socialisation as modern market agents had already begun during the bourgeoisification of Iranian society under the Shah's rule. Faced with the rupture in their class position due to the Islamic transformation of Iranian society, departure presented Iranians with the possibility of its preservation and reproduction abroad. A major force in spurring émigrés to cross international borders and settle in the west was therefore émigrés fear of interruption in their continued reliance on the needs of other burghers not only at home but even globally in order to reproduce themselves. If the fear of persecution at home entailed émigrés' active pursuit of, even if temporarily, universal rights, when entering into a foreign country the fear of proletarianisation was instrumental in their return to rely on particularised bourgeois needs in order to identify themselves in class terms afterwards.

Recourse to universal rights as a source of identity in diaspora was geared to a narrative of dislocation and loss based on witnessing of the political repression at home. In contrast the particularised needs as the basis of a diasporic identity and presence called for the deployment of non-discursive means of assertion of taste and distinction as for example in the production and consumption of food. A narrative of dislocation and loss which necessarily entailed the notion of rights, equality and solidarity brought into the fore émigrés' conflicting views on the political development of the country in the past and how its future should be shaped before they were forced to abandon living there. Such a narrative could not unite and mediate between Iranian émigrés sharing a markedly conflicting past at home in an attempt to forge a common future in diaspora through recourse to the notion of rights, as demonstrated by the female Iranian passer-by denouncing the new identity – as refugee – adopted by Iranian émigrés. Particularised needs, on the other hand, mediated between Iranians as burghers irrespective of the suffering inflicted on them as Man and the Citizen as rights-bearing subjects, at home. The fear of losing their identity as burghers derived from émigrés' reduced ability to use others' wants and caprices as the means of asserting their identity. Against this reduced ability the linguistic community of Farsi-speakers provided a human pool from within

which the wants and caprices of others were drawn upon by émigrés to shore up the fear of losing their class identity. The expectation that movement across transnational borders had to be a continuity in terms of class mobility, eventually resulting in the reproduction of old class relations, was particularly pronounced among those Iranian émigrés who, fearful of losing their position in the bourgeoisification under the Shah's rule, made an early exit to settle in the west even before the rule was toppled. For these émigrés border crossing – international or otherwise – was synonymous with a continuous identification of the migrant in the host country as a member of the bourgeois social class formation. The refugee status however, which enabled them to make an entry into the host society and claim the rights denied to them at home militated against this expectation of social class advancement, due to the derogatory meaning and marginal class position conveyed by it – a paradox which accounted for émigrés' reluctance to become involved in the public arena in anything that could draw attention to their «out-of-placeness», their conflicting past and odyssey. The public arena was the space in which Iranians sought recognition of their bourgeois class identity. Through her denunciation the female passer-by enticed the fear of becoming a proletarianised (wretched) émigré among Iranians who were unable to maintain their identity as a burgher in crossing the international borders.

The diasporic presence preferred by Iranian émigrés was the one in which the tension-ridden experience of time resulting from an uncertain future was avoided (Sanadjian, 1995). The de-temporalised device most commonly used by the émigrés to enunciate their presence as a continuity was culinary practice. The production and consumption of Iranian food perceived alternately as «authentic» and «exotic» was the domain of action onto which a de-narrativised assertion of identity was displaced freed from the tension between the past and the future.

## Authentic vs exotic

An Iranian émigré in Germany in the late 80's provoked a negative reaction from his mother who was at the time staying with him and his wife when he asked the women to cook the celebrated «plebeian» Iranian dish *abgusht* for a German acquaintance he had invited for lunch. The guest had expressed his interest in trying an «original» Iranian dish. The women promptly responded to the request by asking loudly, «Why *abgusht*?» Implicit in their protest was the choice of dish they had been asked to prepare for their German guest. Both women particularly the older one who was an experienced cook had demonstrated the ability to cook the dish and had joined with other Iranians on numerous occasions to eat *abgusht* with them. The question behind their protest was the propriety of the dish chosen to serve a German guest.

The dish was a stew made from lamb – fatty meat combined with bones – boiled with peas, beans and potato flavoured by salt, pepper and other spices. Traditionally, cooked meat and pulses were removed from the soup, pounded together and eaten with bread after the soup was eaten with pieces of bread soaked

into it.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, however, there had been a growing tendency among Iranians demanding the cooked meat separate from the pulses and potato as opposed to the traditional way of pounding them into an undifferentiated mixture. Abgusht was eaten by Iranians occasionally and usually in a small group to celebrate their coming together emphasising their commonality. On these occasions the «guests» were often served the dish when they were sitting, in a rather ad hoc manner, around a cloth (*sufreh*) spread on the floor in contrast to a more differentiated use of space in serving a more elaborate meal through a carefully arranged dining table and chairs. Every one sat where space was available with little exchange of formalities which normally accompanied the division of space between lower and higher places in a dinner party. Eating abgusht as described by an Iranian émigré was the occasion on which he and his male friends sat on the floor with their pyjamas on whilst they listened to Iranian popular songs. Reference to wearing pyjamas by the male participants indicated the ostentatious display of informality that marked the occasion of eating abgusht. The haphazard negotiation of seating around the spread cloth by the guests themselves denied their hosts the central role of distributing seating places to the diners according to the status assigned to them as «guests». The relative chaos that ensued when abgusht was served reduced the «friction of distance» that kept apart the demarcated positions – not only between the host and guests but also among the guests themselves (see Harvey 1989). The invitation to an abgusht eating occasion carried the message that those invited should lower their expectation of being treated as «guests». Correlatively, the message reduced the pressure normally born by the housewife when preparing a more elaborate meal, combining its ingredients and the order in which it was served (Douglas, 1971).

The guest was someone for whom a meal was prepared who in return acknowledged the status of the producer of the meal. Abgusht, on the other hand, was not considered as the dish whose production warranted such an acknowledgement. Thus, in order to be granted the status of a guest required the production of a proper meal. The producer of the meal could in turn represent to the guest her dexterity and hard work (*zahmat*), a combination of hard work and skill, in the prepared meal. This display enabled the producer to make the guest, as a female Iranian once put it, feel ashamed (*sharmandeh*) – evidently for being offered an elaborate meal as a gift only for it to be consumed and with no immediate return. Without creating this feeling of being «ashamed» by an ostentatious display of hard work and skill by the host in the production of the meal there was limited room for the recognition of a guest. Thus, the opportunity for production of meals was also the time when the positions of guest and host were confirmed. The stew, abgusht, with its questionable status as a meal, failed to mediate in negotiating the mutually related positions of host and guests. To prepare the dish did not involve a dextrous work by the host nor did it entail the acknowledgement of the work by the guest. Unlike other Iranian dishes

2 The instrument traditionally used to pound the meat and pulses/potato was called meat-pounder (*gusht-koob*), made from a piece of wood or metal with a long handle and shallow base. It stood singularly for the elimination of social status that was represented through production and consumption of abgusht.

whose production enabled the producers to gain the appreciation of the consumer by the displayed dexterity and the attendant hospitality, *abgusht* was a commoner dish whose production was generally credited with little elaborate, dextrous work. Production of *abgusht*, therefore, subverted the opportunity for the female producer to be acknowledged as the «host» and to gain recognition for her work.

The pounded, indistinguishable mixture of the remaining parts of *abgusht* usually offered its consumers little means of expressing their distinct tastes. Hence the «plebeian» character attributed to the stew as opposed to the «aristocratic» status enjoyed by roasted meat (*kebab*) and drained rice (see Levi-Strauss, 1966). The Iranian émigré who asked his mother and wife to cook the dish for a German guest frequently ridiculed a male émigré friend for being spoiled by his mother at home who met her son's regular demand for a piece of meat when *abgusht* was cooked instead of waiting for a share of the pounded mixture. The individual, joyful appropriation of separate meat, as opposed to its undifferentiated distribution among *abgusht*-eaters as a commensal practice removed its binding effect as an enunciation of close relationship in a home community (*Gemeinschaft*) by reducing it to an expression of individual taste. The tension arising from different modes of consumption of the «plebeian» dish was echoed in the complaint by a female Iranian émigré that disagreement among *abgusht*-eaters over how to eat it prevented her from making the dish. As the object of pleasure the production and consumption of the Iranian dish was invested with incompatible – private and collective – meanings.

As the object of pleasure food was invested with different meanings among Farsi-speaking émigrés even if the term *lazatt* used by them to describe this pleasure could not differentiate the significance they attached to food. Despite the emphasis by Iranian émigrés on eating *abgusht* as an expression of commonality the dish was consumed deploying different meanings of the term *lazatt* (pleasure). It was eaten both as an object of enjoyment (*jouissance*) or as a commensal appropriation (Anigbo, 1996) in which individual choice was superseded by the expression of a collective unity in which pleasure (*plisir*) was primarily defined as a meaningful action (Barthes, 1973).<sup>3</sup> Thus the pleasure derived from eating *abgusht* conveys both commensality, as a collective cultural practice, and an individual appropriation of enjoyment. The incompatible public and private appropriation of the dish as the object of pleasure conferred on the term *lazatt* conflicting meanings that made *abgusht* eating as a «home-going» fraught with tension. This was demonstrated by the male émigré ridiculing his Iranian friend who spoiled the commensal *abgusht*-eating by turning it into an exercise in private individual satisfaction.

The women who protested on being asked to prepare *abgusht* for a German guest, on the other hand, were resentful as the opportunity was denied to them to display their dexterity by producing an elaborate meal that could match the distinct taste of a German guest for an exotic Iranian dish. Eating *abgusht* was designed

3 Unlike French in which *jouissance* and *plisir* meanings of pleasure were distinguished the Persian term *lazatt* was used to convey the two distinct meanings (Barthes, *ibid*).

to incorporate Iranian producers and consumers as members of an a-temporal community (*Gemeinschaft*) in which the distinction of tastes among its members as well as their uneven skills were subsumed within an undifferentiated assertion of identity as Iranian «commoners». The production of a «plebian» dish like abgusht was seen by the female producers as an internal matter among Iranians from which the German guest should have been excluded. Unlike abgusht, however, whose production and consumption brought together the producers and consumers in a homogeneous Iranian community an elaborate meal designed to meet the exotic caprices and wants of a German consumer promised to integrate the producers and consumer within a multicultural framework.

Given the critical mediation of Iranian meals in maintaining the distinct roles of guest and host the choice of abgusht as the dish to serve a German guest was seen as an anomaly. The meal the women wished they had been asked to prepare for the German guest was the object of a pleasure (*lazatt*) that was invested with a meaning shared by Iranians and Germans interacting with each other as burghers in a wider association (*Burgerliche Geselleschaft*). Unlike their male relative who wanted them to represent, through production of a commoner dish, an a-temporal Iranian community (*Gemeinschaft*) the women were keen to participate, through production of an elaborate exotic meal, in an association of burghers (*Burgerliche Geselleschaft*), whose members drew on each other's caprices and wants to materialize their identities. The association of burghers into which the German was incorporated as the potential consumer of an exotic Iranian meal was an extension of the one within which the women regularly produced «authentic» Iranian dishes for their Iranian guests. Within this association Iranian dishes were produced and consumed either as «authentic» ones when offered to Iranian guests or as «exotic» when the guest was a foreigner.

As a primarily «egalitarian» dish that made invisible the differentiated status of the participants in its production and consumption, abgusht could not adequately represent the dexterous work of a producer of a meal and the distinct taste of its consumers (cf Hegel, 1967). Given the critical role of culinary practice in the enunciation of Iranian diasporic presence in Germany the choice of abgusht as the dish to serve a German guest was seen as an anomaly by the women who were asked to cook it. In enouncing their diasporic presence as burghers – with or without the use of culinary practice – Iranians needed the mediation of German burghers who required a more elaborate dish than abgusht to acknowledge the skill of female Iranian producers. Members of German society (*Burgerliche Geselleschaft*) although invested with the equal rights of citizens were fully engaged in transactions through which everyone used each other as the means of satisfying their needs as burghers. Echoed in the skeptical response by the women who had been taken to the task of making abgusht for a German guest was the fear that the production of the dish might expose their marginal position in the host society – the fear of proletarianisation widely felt by Iranians in diaspora.

## Gender roles and culinary mediation

In a German city in 2000 in one of two Iranian shops that supplied home groceries and delicacies to the city's sizeable population of Iranian émigrés, a handful of Iranian men became engaged in a conversation about the role of Iranian cuisine in articulating their diasporic presence. The exchange started with the men acknowledging the growing involvement of younger Iranian men in diaspora in the production of food matched by the noted withdrawal of younger Iranian women from the prominent role traditionally assigned to them in the kitchen. The comment by a young man in the shop about his own readiness to learn more how to cook as opposed to his grown up sister's «hopeless» inability in making dishes was promptly seized by a middle-aged émigré who attributed the readiness by Iranian men to develop their culinary skill to their aim to court German girls' favour, «there was a time when people referred to such and such girl as having, say, pilau rice with green beans crowning her dowry; there was at least one dish that every Iranian girl knew how to cook perfectly well. Now this is the case with Iranian boys who have learned how to make at least one Iranian dish well».

Smiling in acquiescence in response the young man went on to mention the elaborate Iranian dish called *ghormeh-sabzi* – a stew of finely chopped leafy herbs and vegetables – was the one the young Iranian men were quite keen to make for German girls in their efforts to impress them. The young man admitted, however, that male expectations from women and the pressure brought to bear on Iranian women to comply with their traditional role to prepare food for men had by no means disappeared among Iranian émigrés. His own older brother, he added, who had married to an Iranian girl continues to make a fuss about his wife's inadequate culinary skill.<sup>4</sup> He attributed the Iranian men's discontent with women's lack of culinary skill and the unwillingness to play their traditional role in the kitchen in diaspora to the attempt by a sizeable number of Iranian men in Germany to ask their relatives in Iran to find a suitable home-grown bride for them who was prepared to play this role. Iranian émigrés widely referred to the practice by some men to seek the support of their relatives back in Iran to find a suitable Iranian bride at home and arrange to dispatch her to Germany where she would join her prospective Iranian-born husband. It seems that away from home where food was normally prepared for the family's male members as its primary consumers Iranian men faced the challenge of either to redefine their position by taking an active role in the production of food or forge a closer link with home in an attempt to recover their age-old privilege. The challenge was acknowledged by a male émigré who

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4 Iranian dishes generally took a long time to prepare. The time experienced in cooking, where women have traditionally been the main producer, was ordered by a combination of sequences and durations measured against the clearly defined signs. The combination was learned through practice. The predominant role of practice provided a considerable room for individual improvisation to be put to the test of its consumers. The craftsmanship involved in the elaborate and long process of preparation of Iranian food seemed to have deterred younger Iranian women in diaspora who refused to accept the role traditionally assigned to them.

summed up how he began to learn making Iranian dishes, «There was no choice but to do it yourself!»

Thus, in their efforts to meet the wants and caprices of female Germans longing for an elaborate Iranian – exotic – dish some young Iranian men developed a culinary skill that allowed them to subsume their otherness within a multicultural assertion of diversity in the host society. Within this multiculturalist framework the taste of a female German consumer for an exotic dish matched the culinary skill acquired by an Iranian man who had adopted the role of producer of the meal normally played by women within an exclusively Iranian setting. The satisfaction of the needs and caprices of Iranians and Germans defined within a multicultural setting was the basis on which these Iranian men asserted their identity as male partners of female German citizens, albeit after improvising the repertoire for culinary practice they had inherited. In contrast, other Iranian men acted as right-bearing subjects in Germany by using their right to choose their spouse from Iran or from wherever they wished, to live in Germany. Paradoxically, the men's recourse to the rights derived from membership of German society as an association (*Gesellschaft*) of citizens coincided with their claim of membership of an original – home – community (*Gemeinschaft*) in which was embedded men's privileged position in a household as the primary recipient of their mother and wife's culinary service. Whilst some younger Iranian men redefined their role in the production of Iranian cuisine through mediation of the host society others resorted to an a-temporal notion of community to restore the male privilege that had been challenged by younger female émigrés in diaspora. Men's recovery of their privileges at home as male members of the community – where equal rights had no place – was mediated by their exercise of rights in diaspora. The irony of evoking the rights of Man, incorporated within the legal framework of Germany, by the Iranian émigrés in diaspora to back their claim to a privileged treatment by a wife who was acquiescent to her traditional role did not escape those Iranians who registered it with a smile when they mentioned such arrangements. As a constitutional democratic state Germany had adopted a legal framework compatible with the universal rights of Man and of the Citizen as a result of which the state was under legal obligation to respect the right of Iranian émigrés not only to cross its international borders in their escape from political persecution but also to choose their spouse when a resident in Germany. In exercising their choice of spouse based on their rights the émigrés were aware that their choice was backed by their rights as residents in Germany. The constitution of the Islamic state in Iran, on the other hand, makes no provision for the exercise of choice based on the rights of Man or of the Citizen in marriage or otherwise. Instead these rights had to give way to what is permitted and prohibited for a Muslim as a member of the homogeneous Muslim Community (Ummat) that remains under the tutelage of the Supreme Leader with or without the mediation of the ballot box (Sanadjian, 2009).



## Conclusion

The non-discursive character of culinary practice and the limited room it leaves for the representation of the subject has made the production and consumption of Iranian cuisine a favoured device among Iranians émigrés in Germany for the articulation of their diasporic presence. The culinary practice in diaspora neutralised the tension resulting from the presence of Iranians among Germans by leaving this presence largely de-narrativised. The non-discursive representation of taste and culinary skill helped the émigrés to reduce their tension-ridden relationship with home. This absence from home has been made possible by the émigré assuming a new identity as a rights-bearing subject enabling him/her to cross an international border as an escapee from political persecution. Instrumental in the defusion of tension was pleasure as the object of culinary practice. The ambiguity surrounding the term *lazzat* used by the Farsi-speaking émigrés to convey pleasure resonated with the oscillating meanings they attached to the term as the expression of taste as a private, individual appropriation of food, on the one hand, and its public commensal expression. Thus, the muted voice of the subject in the production and consumption of Iranian cuisine helped the émigrés to avoid narrativising their escape from home and the subsequent call on them to act as the witness of their violated rights – i.e. as rights-bearing subjects and citizens in pursuit of solidarity, freedom and equality in the political space. Instead, as the producer and consumer of Iranian food they sought to maintain their link with home as a burgher (bourgeois) by continuing to rely on each other's wants and caprices, as well as those of their German hosts, as the means of social reproduction in diaspora. The deferred identity of a rights-bearing subject allowed the émigrés to seek a reconnection with home. The salient feature of this resumption was the recovery of lost privileges as borne out by the role of men as primary recipients of women's culinary services. By refusing to articulate their identity as rights-bearing subjects in a narrative of dislocation – through witnessing the political repression at home – in the public domain, Iranian émigrés not only left blurred their identity as the victims of political repression but also their changing agency as bearers of class and gender in diaspora.

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# Engaging with Social Inequalities: The Stakes of Social Relations among Iranian Migrants<sup>1</sup>

*Oh heart, know that there are three kinds of friends: / Friends in name, and friends with whom to share profit, and friends of the heart. / Share profit with your friend, but don't get too close / Beware of the friend in name / But keep the friend of the heart / Dedicate yourself to him as much as you can.<sup>2</sup>*

Jalâl ad-Din Mohammad Rumi

This Iranian poem, of which I learned from two Iranians I met during my fieldwork, describes a variety of relations that link people together, from cant, to mutual profit, to unconditional support. This volume interrogates the social dynamics that shape the way Iranian migrants position themselves towards one another. The interest of this chapter is to understand how closeness and distance in social relations among Iranian migrants is related to the chances and limitations they meet in their personal and professional development.

In order to tackle this question, I first explain how heterogeneity among migrants can be understood in relational terms and show how these processes relate to the creation of material and immaterial resources that help to gain upward social mobility. Second, applying this approach to a case study, I examine the alliances and divisions that emerged among Iranian migrants during the promotional campaign of an Iranian cultural festival in Hamburg in relation to its reception by the German society. The city of Hamburg is an interesting location of study as it is one of the oldest destinations of Iranian emigration, its beginnings dating back to the mid-19th century<sup>3</sup>. Today, it hosts one of Europe's largest Iranian

1 I would like to thank Ieva Snikersproge for her invaluable comments on a previous version of this paper, as well as Andrew Silva and Lia Bashari for their precious language assistance.

2 My translation from the Persian original:

دلایاران سه قسم اند گر بدانی: ازبانی اند و نانی اند و جانی \ به نانی نان بده از در برانش \ حذر کن ای دل از یار زبانی \ ولیکن یار جانی را نگهدار \  
به پایش جان بده تا می توانی.

3 The first commercial and friendship treaty between the Hanseatic city of Hamburg and the Persian Empire was signed in 1857.

populations, with over 23'000 people of Iranian origin (Statistisches Amt für Hamburg und Schleswig-Holstein 2013), and strong economic and political ties continue to link the city with Iran. Based on the analysis of social relations that emerge in the case study, I conclude that it is necessary to understand social boundary making among Iranian migrants in relation to their engagement with structural and social limits to their incorporation into Hamburg's society.

## Theoretical reflections on social boundary making and social mobility

Heterogeneity is a key word when it comes to Iranian migration. Indeed, in my dual role as an anthropologist and German-Iranian, I often heard migrants themselves say: «That association split because of an internal discord [...]», or «The Turks help each other, support each other, but not we Iranians.» Consequently, research in social sciences has spoken of a «fragmentation» within the Iranian «community», or talked about «communities» in plural. Relations are reportedly shaped by skepticism and distrust and are therefore qualified by the Persian expression *dori va dosti* (literally: «distance and friendship») (Kamalkhani, 1988), meaning «the less we have to do with each other, the better we get along». In search for an explanation for this observation, I suggest to look at heterogeneity, or «fragmentation», not as a naturally given fact, but as the outcome of processes of social boundary making.

The making of social boundaries is one of the major fields of interest in social sciences. Thanks to the conceptualization made by the sociologists Emile Durkheim (1981) and Max Weber (1922) nearly a century ago, today scientists agree that social differences are the product of the interaction of people, and that they are not naturally given, as previously believed. The creation and dissolution of such boundaries take place within the negotiation of social hierarchies. To give an example of a social category that often serves to establish social difference and hierarchies, especially in the context of international migration, let us look at the notion of «ethnicity». In most parts of the world, the common sense understanding of ethnicity relies on the idea that people belong to an ethnic group if they share a biological origin, display the same cultural values and practices, speak the same language and oppose their identity to that of other ethnic groups. However, since the late 1960s, research in anthropology advocates the viewing of ethnicity as a fluid category that is constantly created, recreated, and contested through social interaction. In his influential contribution, Frederik Barth, suggests that ethnic categories are the outcome of the interaction of individuals, in which «some cultural features are used by the actors as signals and emblems of differences, others are ignored, and in some relationships radical differences are played down and denied» (Barth 1998, p.14). In other words, ethnicity is not an *objective* category, but it gains or loses significance depending on its usage in specific social contexts. Accordingly, there are no objective features that qualify someone as Iranian. Indeed, people of Iranian origin can have very different interpretations of what it means to be «Iranian». While some, for example, refer to certain traditions and rituals to give meaning to their sense of «Iranianness», for others these very traditions might not be constitutive

for the establishment of Iranian ethnic identity and the formation of communities.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the perception of ethnic differences depends on the social context. An Iranian migrant might be categorized as belonging to an ethnic minority and excluded on these grounds by his German neighbors, but at the same time, be an equal member in an international professional network, where his ethnicity does not lead to the creation of a boundary. Correspondingly, the same logic towards ethnicity applies to other categories used in social boundary making, such as class or gender. My interest is thus to examine how the creation, maintenance, or dissolution of social boundaries among Iranian migrants is related to the chances and impediments they experience in finding their place in the German society.

Indeed, one of the main driving forces of migration is the wish to gain upward social mobility, in other words, a «better» position within social hierarchies. According to the influential work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1979; 1983; 1985), we can understand the usage of social boundaries by studying how people classify other people's position in society and define their own. An individual's social position is commonly associated with the amount of resources at his disposal relative to that of others. Therefore, in order to attain a better social position, people aspire to accumulate material and immaterial resources, which allow them to draw boundaries to and distance themselves from certain individuals and social positions, and to acquire their desired place in the social hierarchy. These resources have been conceptualized as different types of «capital»: economic capital (financial assets), cultural capital (education, titles, know-how), and social capital (contact with people who can provide any kind of support). However, the mere accumulation of these resources does not automatically translate into upward social mobility and the desired social position. Rather, a person's resources have to be acknowledged and valued to be a «capital» *by the social environment he or she wants to employ them in*, called the «social field».

In studying the social mobility of migrants, we need to pay attention to the fact that most of them maintain relations with people or organizations in the country of origin and sometimes even other places (Glick-Schiller/Basch/Szanton-Blanc, 1992). Accordingly, many migrants occupy different – sometimes contradictory – social positions in several social fields at the same time. This means that in their striving for social mobility, they have to deal with different societal contexts and national systems of reference for the evaluation of their resources. For example, a medical degree from a university in Iran might not have the same value in the German job market as it has among Iranian migrants. In Germany, the holder might not be able to find employment as a doctor, because the degree is not acknowledged as cultural capital. At the same time, however, working as a taxi driver, the holder's Iranian colleagues would respectfully call him *âghâ doktor* (doctor), as a sign that they recognize his education as a cultural capital. An individual's social position in one space thus influences and complements his positions in other spaces.

4 Moreover, as Iran is a multi-ethnic country, this variety of ethnic identities is present also among its migrants.

In addition, it is important to point out that there can be limits to the accumulation of capital. Indeed, depending on the position of a person's country of origin within international political and economic systems, as well as on his personal characteristics, such as skin color, she can see herself labeled with a negatively charged category that impedes on the recognition of her resources by the social context (Ong, 1999). Thus, in trying to explain closeness and distance among Iranian migrants, I take into account the strategies different actors use to strive for upward social mobility. Thereby, I trace how the relations between local Iranian migrants, which I conceive here as a social field, are influenced by the chances and impediments to the accumulation of capital they have in other social fields within the German society, or at the transnational level.

After this theoretical discussion, let me now move to the analysis of the case study. The ethnographic account of the organization of an Iranian cultural festival in Hamburg offers a circumscribed social setting in which I trace the creation, maintenance and dissolution of social boundaries between people of Iranian origin.<sup>5</sup>

## Alliances and oppositions around a cultural festival

The organization of an Iranian cultural festival was Behruz<sup>6</sup> – a young second generation German-Iranian – first project as a self-employed cultural organizer. The following analysis is based on the assumption that, by organizing the festival, Behruz aspired for upward social mobility. Therefore, he needed to create different forms of capital. The discussion shows how Behruz, as well as his interlocutors, managed social boundaries during the festival's promotional campaign as a response to the limits of capital accumulation they met and how this boundary work influenced the outcome of the festival.

### *The organizer's personal background*

When I first met Behruz, the 26 years old man introduced himself as a German with Iranian and Iraqi roots. Through multiple informal discussions during my three month engagement, I learned that his parents grew up as upper class Iranians in Bagdad, migrated as adults to Tehran, and finally moved to Germany where Behruz was born. Through its migratory trajectory, the family had known many social, cultural and economic ruptures. In particular, his parents had faced barriers to the accumulation of capital based on their ethnolinguistic categorization: In Iran, they have been stigmatized as members of the Arab speaking population, one of the country's most marginalized ethnic minorities. Similarly, in Germany, they more than once experienced downward social mobility, because their status as migrants made it was difficult to transfer or to create capital in German social fields.

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- 5 The case study is drawn from a nine month ethnographic research I conducted in Hamburg in 2013 and 2014, in which I became involved in the organization of the festival. My data is thus based on my active participation in interactions around the festival, as well as on formal and informal interviews.
- 6 To protect the privacy of my interlocutors, all names are changed.

His father, for example, a lawyer by training, could not pursue his profession in Germany, and not very successfully worked as a self-employed in commerce before his early retirement. Maybe as a reaction to these difficulties, family relations were very close. Indeed, Behruz had an ambivalent relationship towards his Iranian identity which is probably grounded in his parents' experience of marginalization in Iran: While he embraced certain aspects of Iranian culture, such as Iranian classical music, he had a rather negative image of Iranian people and, maybe to underline his individuality, in conversations with me he often put forward his Arab background. Significantly, prior to the festival, his contacts with other people of Iranian origin largely consisted of his family.

In his own professional trajectory, Behruz also had to face personal and structural constraints to the accumulation of capital (for example personal insecurity, restricted admission for the curriculum of his choice). He went through several years of professional disorientation during which he made a living with an unskilled job. Yet, he had the ambition to overcome these problems and achieve upward social mobility. This was reflected, on the one hand, in his appearance. Tellingly, Karim, another volunteer of Iranian origin, once commented that Behruz «dresses like a rich kid but does not think like one». On the other hand, we can infer his striving for upward mobility from his career choices. He was still an undergraduate student in political science, when he decided to establish himself as a self-employed cultural organizer.

When launching the project, Behruz actually had only very limited financial resources (economic capital), and he had no experience in event management, nor a degree that would prove his qualification (cultural capital), nor a professional network he could rely on for support (social capital). Thereby, his migration background constituted a supplementary difficulty to his strategies of capital accumulation, often causing stigmatization. This stigmatization, based on his categorization as racially dominated (i.e. non-white German), had led – in the past – to the devaluation of his resources (Weiss 2001 : 89–98). In becoming a cultural organizer, Behruz tried to turn this disadvantage to an advantage: He accepted the stigma of the migrant he had struggled with so far, and used it to promote intercultural understanding as a cultural organizer. For the purpose of this festival, he put forward the Iranian, and set aside the Arab part of his identity in public. In sum, in presenting himself as a cultural expert, he drew on his familiarity with both the Iranian and the German cultural context to try to create cultural capital.

*The festival's concept in local German and Iranian social fields<sup>7</sup>*

Scheduled for a three-day weekend in spring 2013, the event was Behruz' first project and supposed to be the kick-off edition of an annual festival. While Behruz aimed to center on a different country every year, this first edition was dedicated

7 Obviously, the distinction between Iranian and German social fields is a simplification I did for this research. In reality, there are multiple overlappings between different German, Iranian and international social fields.

to Iran. In the face of the lack of seed money, Behruz decided to raise the necessary funds – an estimated 30.000€ – through an online crowdfunding campaign.<sup>8</sup> During our first meeting three months before the festival, he declared his aim was to attract German public, meaning locals with no Iranian background. Indeed, Behruz seemed primarily wanting to gain recognition as an entrepreneur in German social fields, wherefore a limitation to the ethnic niche economy would have been detrimental.

In the majority society, Behruz promoted the festival as a contribution to the city's multiculturalism. To incite the interest of Germans, Behruz wanted to present a – supposedly – apolitical, cultural image of Iran, contesting the negative image forged by Western mass media. The festival's program consisted of an exhibition of portrait and landscape pictures, as well as concerts of Iranian classical and folk-lore music, one each evening. It was thus constituted of two actually very contrasting elements: first, romanticized rural life and folklore, and, second, a complex musical tradition popular mainly among the urban cultural elite<sup>9</sup>. By changing the German public's image of Iran, he could hope to gain recognition for Iranian cultural elements as capital and overcome barriers to social mobility posed by his ethnic categorization.

When addressing the local Iranian public, instead of the multiculturalism he promoted in the German context, he built the festival's concept on an opposition to the typical format of ethnic events, designed exclusively for people of Iranian origin. In particular, Behruz despised the festive atmosphere of typical pop-music concerts, called *bezan-o-bekub* (literally «play and beat», i.e. dancing and clapping hands, as shallow entertainment.), as shallow entertainment. So, he told me «I find it stupid just to party. That's also what all people in Iran want. I want to convey content. Partying is Western, not Iranian.» The key idea through which he wanted to distinguish the festival from other Iranian events, and which also helped to avoid ethnic labelling, was a neat layout of publications and an unconventional venue – a location known for avant-garde performing arts.

Thus, in organizing the festival, Behruz tried to generate capital both in the German social space and the local Iranian social field, in satisfying two different kinds of public with one concept, strategically using different discourses.

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- 8 Crowdfunding is a method to finance independent artistic or otherwise innovative projects that was initiated in the late 2000s and gained much popularity and success in the early 2010s. Via an intermediate online platform, people can choose projects for which they want to make a donation. Indeed, the condition of the initiative is that the necessary funds are raised within a specific time frame. If not, the donations are restituted to the donators and the project cannot be realized.
- 9 Incidentally, the content of the festival – rural life and the music of the cultural elite – was as exotic to many Iranian migrants as it was to Germans, with most migrants being of urban middle class background. Many visitors told me that they did not usually listen or particularly fancy Iranian classical music, because it was very nostalgic.



*Fundraising strategies in German and Iranian social fields*

In German social fields, Behruz did not succeed in accessing subsidies from local authorities, as for political reasons they could not support any project on Iran. In the wider society, his efforts to gain support for the festival also faced barriers. On the one hand, he was critiqued by the staff of the festival venue who doubted of his competences. On the other hand, the crowdfunding campaign, for which he counted mainly on German public, failed to raise enough funds. Why was it difficult for Behruz to create capital out of Iranian cultural elements in German social fields? First, Behruz' great ambition was discredited by his lack of expertise. Second, the cultural elements introduced were probably too unknown to be easily acknowledged as a capital by the German public, and, third, the prejudices attached to Iran were persistent. The inefficacy of the promotional campaign in the German context stirred in Behruz and his family a disenchantment of the idea to overcome stigmatization, although there were a few young Germans who actually supported the project as volunteers. Nevertheless, two months before the festival, Behruz decided to pursue the project anyway, hoping to cover at least the expenses with ticket sales, his own and his family's savings.

The difficulties he experiences in creating capital in German social fields fueled Behruz' expectations towards Iranian migrants. To address a public of Iranian origin, Behruz posted flyers in migrant neighborhoods, laid them out in Iranian restaurants, and distributed them at concerts. Thereby, he first used the same material as for the general public in German language, and only reluctantly printed a small number of posters in Farsi, after a newly arrived migrant convinced him that Iranians would find publicity in their mother tongue more appealing. But, he also contacted Iranian political and economic stakeholders and associations directly to ask for financial support – something he did not do in the German context. His mother who was in charge of writing emails or personally presenting the project, because, as he explained to me, he does not know how to «deal with Iranians.» Indeed, the way he addressed Iranian migrants reflected his complex identifications and ambivalent positioning towards a potential Iranian public. First, he was not at ease with Iranian language and forms of conduct, in other words he lacked of Iranian cultural capital. Second, as mentioned before, he wanted to avoid the categorization of the festival as ethnic – as «distinctly Iranian» – but present it as an expression of Hamburg's multiculturalism. Third, a too great participation of other Iranians would have endangered his expert position in the festival, which first of all aimed at raising his own social status.

Nevertheless, Behruz contacted at least eight Iranian associations, as well as numerous individual stakeholders, such as doctors, travel agencies, and businessmen. He told me that he hoped the political neutrality of the project would help to increase the range of possible supporters. But, consciously or unconsciously, Behruz followed fundraising strategies that were indeed quite political. Maybe because his mother and sister are practicing Muslims, or because he anticipated that leftist associations would not support the de-politicized image of Iran he wanted to present, he contacted the local Imam Ali mosque – an institution largely financed

and equipped by the Islamic Republic of Iran's government. The mosque's administration declined the request, but referred to the cultural department of the Iranian embassy in Berlin, who in turn agreed to provide a grant covering the travel expenses of musicians coming from Iran. However, Behruz was aware that this collaboration would be a reason for the critics of the Iranian regime not to attend the festival. In sum, the collaboration with the Iranian regime was a marker of difference that could potentially lead to the creation of social boundaries between different political groups. Indeed, while the festival failed to create enough cultural capital in the German context because the value of its cultural elements was not recognized, the collaboration with the Iranian government would have been a reason for a part of the Iranian (and German) public to refuse its cultural representation as illegitimate. Thus, in order to avoid losing a part of his potential audience, he concealed this collaboration and thereby suspended the appearance of social differences between Iranian migrants <sup>10</sup>.

#### *Reactions of Iranian migrants*

Notwithstanding Behruz' efforts, Iranian stakeholders' reactions to his requests were mostly negative; they would not reply or decline, he often complained. Two main causes relative to the different actors' strategies of capital accumulation can be identified: First, part of the lack of support for Behruz' festival can be explained with competition. For example, he presented the project to Javid, the head of a local Iranian association, to propose a cooperation. Javid, 64 years old, came to Germany when he was in his mid-twenties and today is a board member of a successful international enterprise which recently entered the Iranian market. Moreover, his association had tried – in vain – to create a cultural project in collaboration with the Hamburg government and the Islamic Republic. Thus, because of the variety of his capital assets, Javid is one of the most influential Iranian economic stakeholders in Hamburg. After several weeks without a reply, Behruz indignantly told me he had learned that Javid did not, as promised, present the project at the association's general assembly. Interestingly, he neither complied with the invitation for the festival he had received, which would have been a different kind of support. Instead, he made a donation of 500€. Later, Javid explained to me that he did not see how a collaboration with Behruz would benefit his association. Indeed, at that time, the association, and particularly Javid as its president, had established themselves as the Iranian government's privileged local partner for cultural projects – a collaboration that consolidated the economic ties Javid already entertained in Iran. Therefore, Behruz' collaboration with the government jeopardized their own position. However, as openly denying support could have devaluated Javid's social and cultural capital among local people of Iranian origin, he chose silent resistance. But competition did not only derive from collaboration with the Iranian government

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**10** However, all along Behruz was afraid people would find out his alliances anyway, as he mentioned, a few days before the festival, that he would expect leftist Iranian migrants to manifest their protest or even attack the festival.

as only very few people were informed about it – but it was also relative to the local Iranian cultural market. Indeed, Behruz soon realized that the posters he put up in ethnic shops often disappeared after only one day, and that an Iranian ticket shop he had commissioned with sales had not sold any. The shops tried to boycott the festival, probably because most of them had their allegiance with other Iranian cultural entrepreneurs.

Second, besides competition, the reluctance of Iranian migrants to support the festival is related to its public reception in Iranian and German contexts, *depending on whether they aspired for upward mobility rather in German or Iranian social fields*. Let us take the example of Nazanin. In her late fifties, she lived in Germany since her childhood, was married to a German lawyer and worked as an educational advisor. The only Iranians she was in contact with were a few family members and she very rarely traveled to Iran. Nazanin decided to volunteer during the promotional campaign, as the festival's sophisticated, positive affirmation of Iranian identity geared to a German public fit in well with her own cultivated, and well-situated lifestyle. However, she withdrew her participation abruptly when she learned, through a friend who worked at the event's venue, that Behruz was mocked by her team. Indeed, the judgment of the project by the German public was crucial to her, while she cared less about its perception by people of Iranian origin. One of the main reasons for her retreat was that, instead of consolidating her situation as a well-positioned German-Iranian, she felt in danger of having her capital devaluated if she would be associated with an unsuccessful project. Indeed, the difficulties Behruz encountered in having the festival valued by the German society undermined his main argument for gaining the support of Iranians. For those, who, contrary to Nazanin, were well embedded into local networks of Iranian migrants, the reception of the project by Iranian stakeholders was at least as important as the opinion of the German society. Unfortunately, in this regard, Behruz was not well equipped. During a meeting, Yara, a young psychologist who was, in contrast to Behruz, much more familiar with the local Iranian landscape and the power relations by which it is shaped, advised him: «If you want to get support from Iranians you need names behind a project». She thereby pointed to the increased role of trust and reputation among Iranian migrants – social capital – compared to the larger society, and implied that people would be much more willing to support a project financially, if it was patronized by someone they know and trust. To build up trust, both time and frequency of exchange is needed in which honesty and reliability are put to the test. But Behruz did not succeed in gaining enough «names» for his project. On the one hand, he was unable to build up these relations, as he had no records among stakeholders to draw on that would prove his trustworthiness (social capital) to other Iranian migrants and he had only a very limited timeframe to raise funds. On the other hand, I had the impression that he was not committed enough to do so, as he often refused to adapt his conduct to what would be expected of him by his interlocutors. Indeed, although presenting himself as Iranian, his ambivalent behavior with other Iranian migrants undermined his promotional strategies. So, when I asked him in an interview after the festival whether he thinks it possible that the

difficulties to raise funds among Iranians are related to the fact that he lacked of relevant contacts, he said: «Seriously, if this is the case, it's just ridiculous. We are not kids anymore!» Thus, as a reaction to the lack of support experienced in the Iranian context, he distanced himself from Iranians, by marking them as childish or putting forward his Arab identity. Instead, he relied mainly on his close family members, his girlfriend, and two German volunteers for support.

At the end of the story, the festival took place, but, due to insufficient ticket sales, the project ran aground financially. In 2015, Behruz commented the festival on a social media website: «These were eight months of very practice oriented occupational training – only that they cost me 25.000€.»<sup>11</sup> The festival took place in a hall fitting 800 people. However, on the three evenings altogether only about 600 tickets were sold. Behruz tried to set up a second edition in 2014 – not only with Iranian but also with Arab and European artists – but he failed again to raise enough funds and abandoned the project.

## Conclusion

In this article, my aim was to show closeness and distance in social relations between Iranian migrants is related to the chances and limitations they meet in their personal and professional development. The ethnographic study described how Behruz tried to build on his Iranian background to gain upward mobility as a cultural organizer. Therefore he needed the festival, and the Iranian cultural elements it featured to be valorized by Germans, creating cultural capital – a capital by which he also wanted to gain the support of Iranian stakeholders. However, repeatedly, German institutions and individuals refused to acknowledge his resources as capital. To circumvent these constraints, he tried to gain the support of Iranian migrants. Therefore, he avoided the emergence of internal social boundaries by concealing markers of difference, for example that between the Persian majority and the Arab ethnic minority to which he belonged, and that between the supporters and the opponents to the Iranian government. Simultaneously, he strove to prevent further ethnic labeling of the festival. Through the interactions between Behruz and his interlocutors, different types of relations developed as they appeared in the poem cited in the introduction of this chapter: There was the cant of the competitors who showed themselves supportive but secretly undermined Behruz' promotional campaign, and the temporary support of people whose main interest was to benefit from the festival for their own strategies of capital accumulation, and finally the disinterested support of the family. Thus, each of the persons Behruz addressed wittingly or unwittingly weighted the interest in supporting the festival for her own striving for upward social mobility. Indeed, closeness and distance between Iranian migrants within this case study reveals to be created through the construction and deconstruction of social boundaries. Whenever Behruz or his interlocutors tried

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<sup>11</sup> «Das waren acht Monate Berufsausbildung, sehr praxisorientiert – halt leider 25.000 Euro teuer.»

to establish, reinforce, or deconstruct social boundaries, they did so in order to create capital and to improve their own social positions in a particular social field which they considered as relevant. All stakeholders considered the effect of closeness and distance on their social position in the field in which they met and interacted, as well as its possible impact on their social positions in other social fields they were engaged in. For Behruz, the outcome of this complex boundary work revealed to be disadvantageous, as he found himself in a position of double marginality at the intersection of German and Iranian social fields, which contributed to the failure of this professional project.

The ethnographic case study shows that social boundary making among Iranian migrants can be understood as a response to the chances and limitations they meet in striving for upward social mobility. Consequently, the movement of migrants between fluid identifications and rigid stereotypes seems to be a tool in their competitive engagement with stigmatization as an expression of global regimes of social inequality.

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SAHAR SADEGHI

# Boundaries of Belonging: Iranian Immigrants and their Adult Children in the US and Germany

This paper aims to bring understanding regarding the experiences of Iranians in Diaspora, with a special focus on belonging and social membership. An analysis of 64 in-depth interviews with immigrant and second-generation Iranians in northern and southern California and Hamburg, Germany reveal several things: first, Iranians in both contexts are overwhelmingly engaged with integrating into their host society with the expectation of attaining belonging and mobility; second, socio-cultural integration, while important, does not necessarily protect Iranians from experiencing stigmatization, marginality, and bounded mobility as a result of their Iranian, Middle-Eastern ancestry, or Muslim background; and third, building community among Iranians is significantly impacted by experiences of marginality, downward mobility, and a lacking practice of participation. This cross-national research illustrates that structural resources for class mobility, as well as positive and fruitful interactions with host society institutions significantly impact Iranians' assessments of mobility, quality of life, belonging and social membership, as well as their willingness to form community with other co-ethnics in Diaspora.

## The discourse of belonging and lived experience

In both the US and Germany, migrants and natives alike are exposed to ideological narratives that highlight the kind of culture and values that the dominant society consider important, and necessary, for the attainment of mobility and quality of life. These hegemonic narratives, or ideological discourses of the state, produce a framework for how individuals can become a part of the larger society, attain mobility, and experience social membership. Among the interviewed Iranians in the US and Germany, there are patterns regarding how these narratives are perceived, internalized, and experienced. Specifically, differences among respondents' narrations and experiences are significantly mediated by the kind of initial reception received upon arrival, state support for settlement, as well as experiences in institutional and interpersonal settings.

## The United States

### *Unmarked belonging*

Interviewees who had positive assessments of their lives in the US understood and experienced the United States to be a nation that values individualism, provides equal opportunities to all, and rewards hard work through eventual success and upward mobility. These respondents did not conceive the US to be a nation that erects structural barriers based on racial/ethnic background and ancestry. Rather, it was experienced to be a place of meritocracy, ethnic pluralism, open opportunity structures, and equality. And if one has the right foresight and not afraid of hard work, one will eventually become successful. Importantly, these positive perceptions and assessments legitimated Iranians' faith and investment in the «American Dream».

Among this set of respondents, there were common factors and conditions, such as: institutionalized or informal migration support, relatively uncomplicated settlement experiences, as well as an ability to translate educational attainments or vocational skills into work opportunities and mobility. Some Iranians also arrived as permanent residents because they had married American citizens, a few had won green card lotteries in Iran, and others had been granted family-based green cards.

Importantly, in most cases, access to education, permanent legal residency upon arrival, and settlement support made Iranian immigrants' transition and integration into US society less disruptive and distressing, with fewer experiences of downward mobility. What is more, among these respondents there were fewer accounts of feeling stigmatized or discriminated against because of being Iranian. Thus, their perceptions that ethnic identity does hinder them from leading productive lives in the US were confirmed by lived experience. Narrations of «unmarked belonging»<sup>1</sup> can be seen in Maryam's account of opportunity, ethnic pluralism, and social membership:

«I would say it is a place of opportunity. It is a place where [...] someone doesn't necessarily need an education or those essentials to have a good income. So the level of income is generally higher. This society is a mixed society. It's [...] that's part of it, is you don't become a part. It's not like the European system where you have to be French to be part of our society; there you have to be European. It's not that. You can retain your own culture while participating in this group culture. So you don't have to change yourself to be part of this society – you can retain who you are.»

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1 «Marked Belonging» and «Unmarked Belonging» are terms I conceptualized and used in my doctoral dissertation. The terms describe the extent to which individuals experience their ancestry, ethnic/cultural identities and background to be hindering for full and equal societal participation – which in turn affects the individual's sense of belonging.



Maryam, a first-generation woman living in southern California, understands the US to be a mixed society that accepts ethnic and cultural difference; this is a part of America's identity, and centrally linked to its national narrative of immigration. Unlike European nations, such as France, that require immigrants to assimilate in order to belong, migrants in the US can retain their culture, their ethnicity, and still be members of society. Maryam's story is instructive; because her relatively uncomplicated experiences with migration and settlement combined with her educational and occupational attainments significantly influenced how she assessed opportunity, social mobility, and equality<sup>2</sup>.

The narratives of Iranians who have had mostly positive assessments of the US illustrate that though knowing the norms, expectations, and cultural values of the host society is important, belonging is significantly facilitated by having access to class resources for mobility and being treated as equal members of society. Iranians who experience the United States as an ethnically plural society, with open opportunity structures, have not personally encountered barriers to belonging and mobility. For some Iranians, these experiences legitimize both the US as an immigrant nation, and belonging as something that is secured by hard work and class mobility.

The question arises, when are feelings of belonging jeopardized for Iranians? What circumstances make belonging unstable for Iranians? In the following section I will highlight the experiences that «mark» Iranians – instances that racialize them –, which result in experiences of exclusion. These experiences pose obstacles to belonging, to mobility, delegitimize the national narrative, and place Iranians in a state of being without belonging.

### *Marked belonging*

Although some interviewed Iranians possessed positive notions of and experiences in the US, there were counter narratives that illustrate Iranians' hesitations regarding America's promises of equality, freedom, and opportunity. Interestingly, it was neither educational or class differences nor lack of cultural integration that significantly influenced Iranians' varying descriptions of mobility and belonging. Rather, vivid experiences with marginality shifted Iranians' perceptions of equality, open opportunity structures, and social membership in the US. For the most part, Iranians who had less idealized notions of life in America, had also worked hard, and possessed the credentials needed for upward mobility. However, encounters with anti-Iranian, and anti-Middle Eastern/anti-Muslim prejudice negatively impacted their prospects for social mobility. This marginality was seen in the form of state policies or interpersonal, face-to-face prejudice. This sense of being stigmatized because of ancestry is captured by Siv's description of her workplace experience:

2 When she arrived in the US, she possessed permanent residency, her husband – an Iranian-American who had lived in the US since the early 1980s – had an established life in southern California and class resources, which facilitated her ability to take community college classes, transfer to a California State University and receive her BA and MA, and ultimately become a certified Nurse in the state of California.

«Um, there is still some, they say its not, but there is still some discrimination here. They say this is supposed to be a great country, there is no discrimination, but there is in a lot of places, even at work. It took a long, long time for me to prove myself, to establish myself, my personality, in the beginning it was not like that. Little things would happen, here and there. Even with some patients, when you want to work with them, they prefer a white person compared to me, they don't tell me this but after 10 or 12 years working there, you can tell, they can be like that. They wont say it's because you're not white, but it's there. My husband notices that at work too, he'll complain. And I say, «maybe you're imagining this,» but he'll say, «no. They are discriminating against me.»»

Siv imagined and expected the US to be a great country, devoid of racial discrimination. Yet, the differential treatment she receives as a dental assistant in a private practice, which primarily caters to white patients, has demonstrated to her that she is not perceived or treated like her white co-workers.

There are number of Iranians – small-business owners, primary and secondary teachers and college professors, as well as high-skilled professionals in fields like science and technology – whose opportunities for advancement are impacted by negative face-to-face interactions, as well as state policies that survey, profile, and marginalize Iranians due to larger global political dynamics between the Iranian government and western nations. The marginality and stigma that «being Iranian» can produce, and the impact of it on mobility patterns and belonging, is illustrated by Paul, a second-generation man living in northern California:

«You know what? I should say this. Up until I stopped working, I never admitted to that part of my heritage. Because there were usually problems associated with that. For example, at my business, we were working on someone's scooter. I had hired my nephew to help me for a summer. For some reason, my nephew brought up our heritage and the customer heard, and I used to have a really good rapport with this man, but I could tell in his face that it was, again, fear and loathing, and he never returned.»

Although Paul was self-employed he was never comfortable with revealing his ancestry, because he perceived it would create problems for him. Ultimately, being recognized as an Iranian affected his business and livelihood, and he learned that hiding his identity was important if he wanted to retain customers, and maintain his business. An environment that regards Iranians with fear and hatred is not conducive to the facilitation of belonging and membership; on the contrary, it stigmatizes the identities of Iranians and results in experiences of being but not belonging. This point is further illustrated by Paul's response to my follow-up question about belonging. When asked about the kinds of things that would produce feelings of belonging for him, he answered, «Better relations between the two countries, it would help a lot.»

The narratives uncovered in the US interviews reveal multiple themes. Perceptions of belonging are connected to whether Iranians experience marginality and discrimination, and see and experience themselves as «marked» or «unmarked». Being «unmarked» aids belonging, one's ethnic culture is considered an asset, or at least something that does not hinder one's ability to belong. What is more, being able to access opportunity structures and gain social mobility further facilitate assessments of belonging in the US.

Conversely, belonging is complicated when Iranians perceive a lack of opportunity and meritocracy; experiences of racial and religious discrimination in the public sphere, especially in the workplace, make them aware that upward mobility is not based on merit or hard work. They understand that they're neither perceived nor treated as «Americans». These experiences of exclusion and discrimination delegitimize the national narrative and also add a racial/ethnic dimension to being an American, and ultimately to belonging. Being «marked» or racialized undermines both the national narrative, which is supposed to be one of inclusion, and the ability of belonging for Iranians. Experiences of discrimination create a sense of *being without belonging*; they understand that they can take part in the labor market, educational institutions, and even mainstream cultural practices, but their experiences of being marginalized create an inability for them to identify with them.

## Germany

An examination of Iranians descriptions of the German context make clear that they perceive the German national narrative to be drastically different from the American one. The respondents overwhelmingly argue that Germany is not welcoming toward immigrants and does not easily accept them; rather, Germany has become a refugee accepting society that is forced by law to admit asylum seekers<sup>3</sup>. Notably, there was not much diversity in regard to how Iranians described the German national context; their conceptualization of Germany as a refugee-accepting nation, and experiences of being treated as «perpetual foreigners» was a common theme among the respondents.

It was also frequently mentioned that the exclusion that Iranians and other non-European immigrants face in Germany is a result of anti-foreigner prejudice, which is rooted in both cultural and racial intolerance. What is more, respondents assert that they have no ancestral connection to Germany, which is something that the German state has historically mandated as a prerequisite to German-ness

3 Germany's constitutional mandate to accept asylum seekers, because of Germany's experiences with Fascism, has been documented in the work of Brubaker, 1992; Green, 2000.

and German ethnic identity<sup>4</sup>. Given these dynamics, Iranians – both first and second-generation – believe they will never be able to fully become «real Germans».

In addition, as demonstrated by the respondents, length of stay in Germany does not necessarily rid one of being viewed as a foreigner or a stranger; the mark of being a foreigner is perceived as something permanent. Iranians are able to utilize some of the opportunities available in Germany with an understanding that they are guests in Germany. It is clear that the German narrative of «not being a nation of immigrants» has influenced Iranians' perceptions of their place in Germany. Yet, what type of foreigners are Iranians? Which category of immigrants do they belong to?

The following section highlights the experiences of Iranians who have attained a good quality of life and feel a part of the larger society. It will also show that Iranians approximate belonging when they are perceived and treated as «good foreigners». Being «good foreigners» entails Iranians incorporating German cultural norms and practices into their everyday lives as a way to signal they have successfully accommodated to German culture and society. An examination of Iranians' experiences with anti-foreigner prejudice and marginality in professional and personal settings will highlight how these interactions influence belonging in Germany.

#### *Being a good foreigner*

Fewer Iranians in Germany, compared to the US, had positive assessments of German society<sup>5</sup>, its opportunity structures, and social membership. Yet, those that did had a number of things in common with those in the US. Namely, their migration and settlement was mostly institutionalized by German educational institutions, German professional firms, or through informal family networks. Importantly, they also felt that they were perceived and treated as «good foreigners»<sup>6</sup>. Those who tended to place a high value on the power of cultural integration in securing success, were also generally migrants that were invited to study or work in Germany, and had a unique skill set and expertise, which placed them in a position to receive an education and settlement package. For these individuals and their families, migration and settlement was fully institutionalized. This kind of reception impacted how they were perceived and treated by Germans, and also influenced their views

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4 The work of Brubaker, 1992; Gilroy, 1992; Giroux, 1995; Bonilla-Silva, 2000; Green, 2000; Alba, 2005 and Muller, 2011 have addressed the importance of ethno-cultural nationalism in the construction of the German state, and its national identity. Blood-based conceptions of citizenship and belonging were crucial in the formation of the «Volk», the German people. These conceptions continue to influence Germany's national narrative, its national identity, and its ideal imaged community.

5 The most positive assessments that were made about Germany were its social insurance program, and the German state's views toward social welfare programs.

6 Many of the high-skilled Iranians who either worked in German or International firms, educational institutions, or had successful small-businesses believed that their cultural competence have helped facilitate their integration, and produced mostly positive interactions with Germans, which in turn helped them be seen as «good foreigners».

toward mobility and membership. When Ali, a first-generation professional was asked about this:

«From the beginning they treated me well; maybe, this is because the person who we rented the second floor from knew why we were there and what I did. And he explained to everyone that he encountered that I was there for my PhD. And this was very important for them that this person is here for his education, so their behavior was very kind and this was opposite and different from what I have heard from friends who have told me that they were not treated well, or treated badly, because of their dark hair or not looking German. That this caused problems for them; we did not have these problems.»

Ali migrated to Germany for this PhD; he received significant and important professional opportunities because of his skill-set, and was offered the opportunity to live in a nice residential neighborhood instead of living in university dorms. Given this context, he perceived that his landlord gave him a certain level of respect. And unlike friends who encountered problems due to anti-foreigner prejudice, Ali did not have such encounters.

Throughout the interviews Iranians often remarked on immigrants being treated differently by Germans depending on how «foreign» they appeared and behaved. For example, Lailea, a second-generation woman, had this to say about how Iranians are received in Germany:

«Well, immigrants, I don't think are really wanted here in the first place. I doubt they like them very much. A German that is here, well, it depends on who the immigrant is. If the immigrant is liberal and open to German culture, it's easier for them to be accepted. But let's say – I know a girl who is Arabic and she wears a headscarf and also speaks with an accent – and that is very difficult for Germans to accept. It's like «look how she is talking and she is living here in Germany». You can't speak like that in Germany. Deep inside, I think that Germans still have some anti-foreigner feelings; they still have ill feelings toward foreigners.»

Although she echoes many of the respondents' views of Germany as a non-immigrant accepting society, she also believes that some foreigners are more accepted. For that to happen one has to become a «good» foreigner by being liberal and open to German culture and values. Conversely, visibly displaying non-Christian faith and non-German culture places one in the «unacceptable» or «bad foreigner» category, because it is assumed that you are illiberal and *traditional*. When Azad, a second-generation man, was asked about how immigrants are received in Germany, he also emphasized some of the points made by Lailea:

«That is very difficult, because there is not one picture of the immigrant. There are people that adopt and try to blend into society, and these ones are perceived as very helpful, and normally you don't have any problems in Germany. But there are also groups of immigrants that are, you know, for example the Turkish who very much like their culture and try to hold on to their culture, they kind of build up this cultural wall. They look down on Germans, because they believe that they know nothing of honor. It's like, for example, German women or western women for them, they are like «she had a boyfriend before me that's a problem, and she is not marriage material». This is ridiculous for me, because instead of taking the positive aspects of your background and trying to adopt here, they kind of separate each other from the whole society. This makes them foreigners here and back home, because they are not really Turkish there either.»

For Azad, «good foreigners» are open to and accepting of German culture, do not segregate themselves from Germans, and do not cling to ethnic culture to the point that it is debilitating toward interacting with and integrating into German society. What is more, Azad believes that adapting to and integrating German culture is one of the ways that foreigners can become «acceptable foreigners» and blend into, or become a part of, German society.

Perceptions of how integrationist ideology and practices could help facilitate a better quality of life and social membership were vivid among a number of respondents. Notably, the disadvantages, or perceived disadvantages, that being Iranian and being a foreigner had on mobility and membership influenced some of the respondents' dating and marriage preferences, this was particularly evident among second-generation respondents.

When I asked Anahita regarding her preferences regarding dating, or marriage partners, she replied:

«There was a time period where I only wanted to date a German man, because I thought I would be able to situate myself well in this society. I have always been the type of person that has wanted to place myself well in this society and most of the decisions that I've made have been based on that. The ways by which I have chosen my friends, is how I wanted to choose my partner [...] Whether they were Polish, Russian, Italian, Portuguese, Turkish, I felt like they wouldn't be able to help me in this society, they were also foreigners, they were also not able to maybe not get a job tomorrow, they would have some problems in this society. I knew that getting a good job would be hard for a Turkish boy, even if he went to the University, and that going to the University for 5–6 years wouldn't translate into him getting a good job. They won't get good jobs here, and for my life, this would not help me progress.»

This belief that having a German partner improves quality of life comes up again and again in the narratives of Iranians in Germany; in ways that it does not in the US. This may point toward a commonly held assumption among Iranians that cultural integration, especially through marriage, facilitates both belonging and mobility in German society.

Moreover, a German partner or spouse may have the social and professional resources and networks that are needed to excel in Germany, especially for those with a foreign background. This is seen in Anahita's discussion of the barriers that non-German men, especially foreign men, face in the larger labor market. By picking a non-German partner, Anahita argues that her quality of life would be negatively impacted by both her marginalization in German educational and labor market institutions as well as her partners.

In sum, although Iranians are generally considered to be foreigners among Germans, some do occupy a «good foreigner» classification, which helps them approximate belonging. Additionally, some Iranians perceive that aside from cultural accommodation, their higher educational attainments positively influenced how Germans viewed them, which helped facilitate their entry into the «good foreigner» category.

#### *The limitations of being a good foreigner*

The data demonstrates that for a significant number of Iranians in Germany, cultural competence and being a «good foreigner» is not enough to secure social membership. The following two narrations are taken from the interviews of two-second generation Iranians; this is noteworthy, because these respondents were born in Germany, possessed German citizenship, and had attained German educational credentials yet still perceived or experienced marginality.

An important discussion of the difficulties of gaining access to certain professions as well as professional advancement came about as Ismael discussed the relationship between hard work, mobility, and discrimination:

«For example, it is hard for foreigners to become judges in this country. Turks who grew up here, they can't even get their foot in the door to become judges, or similar other types of jobs. In general, state jobs are not something that foreigners really have access to. This is different in other countries like the US, England, or France; they have different laws. Like to see a Turkish police officer or even nurse, you just really don't see that. And very importantly politics, there are not that many foreigners that are politicians. And if there are some, their views have to be the same as the other people's opinions; if their views are different than the party and the people in it, it won't work.»

For Ismael, anti-foreigner prejudice and exclusion is institutionalized in German political, economic, and educational institutions. What is more, there are some careers and professions that are not made available to those with a foreign-background, especially those that garner power, status, and social capital. The following account vividly demonstrates how foreign ancestry, and the larger climate of anti-foreigner prejudice, impact belonging and membership. When I asked Kasra, a second-generation Iranian man, about what was most difficult about living in Germany, he stated:

«The suffering that comes with trying all your life to integrate, but you're always a foreigner. That's the hard thing, it's painful; it's made me suffer greatly. There are few people that I have talked to, the way I talked to you. These discussions must be had. People say that Muslims, Iranians, Arabs won't integrate, but you won't let us. That is the problem that is the main problem. So many books are written that Muslims, foreigners, «that their lives don't match ours», and «that they don't open up to our society». But it doesn't matter, and no matter how much we try, the Germans won't let it.»

The pain in Kasra's narrative is undeniable. Although he had migrated to Germany as a young child, had lived there his entire life, completed a vocational program, and was a German citizen, Kasra has not experienced unqualified belonging. On the contrary, he considers anti-Middle Eastern and anti-Muslim bigotry and racism to be a commonplace in Germany. Thus, for him, inclusion and belonging is not attainable by cultural integration, German citizenship, or high occupational prestige; rather, belonging is secured with German ancestry.

The above discussion illustrate that Iranians' perceptions and assessments of belonging and membership are significantly informed by their ability, or inability, to gain access to equal opportunities, mobility, and membership in their host society. Specifically, Iranians with mostly positive experiences tended to have attained high educational and professional backgrounds, which enabled a significant portion of them to become middle-class. This coupled with their mostly positive, or at least neutral, interactions with American or German institutions, and larger society facilitates perceptions and experiences of belonging and membership.

The data also illustrates that although the majority of respondents have a high level of cultural incorporation – as seen in levels of English or German language fluency, educational attainment, occupational/professional, as well as residential integration – they are not necessarily protected from experiencing marginality or discrimination. Stories of discrimination and feelings of exclusion existed in both contexts. However in the German context, among both the first and second generation, a lack of belonging and membership was connected to larger climate of anti-foreigner prejudice. The question remains, why have experiences of marginality not pushed more Iranians toward forming community with one another?



## What about building community?

Some scholars have argued that Iranians' mostly upwardly mobile backgrounds has meant that they have had less of a need to form community<sup>7</sup>. And although I agree that educational attainment as well as occupational and mobility patterns impact community building and solidarity, there are other factors that I have also found to be influential. Examining the larger processes and implications of Iranian migration and settlement help illustrate the specific ways in which experiences with marginality, downward mobility, as well as *a lacking practice of community participation* influence community building dynamics among Iranians.

### *Marginality and downplaying identity*

Given the stories that Iranians, from various walks of life shared with me, it is clear that the larger Iranian community experiences exclusion and discrimination *at higher rates than some admit*. For many of the interviewed Iranians, experiences with discrimination caused them to hide identity, or to try to bring less attention to themselves and their community. And it makes sense that when a community is collectively engaged with concealing or downplaying their identity, they are also less likely to draw further attention by establishing ethnic or culture-based organizations and institutions in their host society. Invisibility in the public sphere and in host-society institutions becomes a covering mechanism; a response, and potential solution, to the disadvantages and stigma that having Iranian ancestry may pose. The interview data shows that Iranians' identities are marked and stigmatized due to their background as Middle Easterners, Muslims, foreigners, or Iranians, especially after 9/11 and given Iran's current standing in the international political system. Thus, we can analyze their «running away» from other Iranians, or their hesitations toward forming community, as part of a larger survival strategy. Pragmatic solutions adopted by some in Diaspora<sup>8</sup>.

Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that Iranians' orientations and tendencies toward downplaying or hiding their identities coupled with their relatively high levels of cultural integration into their host societies has also shifted their orientation away from the Iranian community and toward the host society. Unfortunately,

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7 Specifically, Bozorgmehr (2000) attributes Iranians' upwardly mobile backgrounds, and high educational attainments in the United States as decreasing their need to form strong ethnic networks. However religious and ethnic minorities, such as Iranian Jewish and Iranian-Armenian entrepreneurs, rely primarily on co-ethnic resources in the establishment of businesses, which help facilitate ethnic community and solidarity among them (Min and Bozorgmehr, 2000).

8 We can also see this hesitation in regard to Iranian parents passing on Persian (Farsi) language skills to the second-generation in the US, Germany, and many other western nations. Speaking to their children in mostly English, and not in Persian, was seen as accelerating their children's acceptance into their host society. This was something that many first-generation parents have also later regretted in life. These findings will be examined, fleshed out, and further analyzed in my future publications.

this means that Iranians are less likely to possess the organizational and political support needed to garner attention to issues affecting the Iranian community.

#### *Downward mobility and shame*

Importantly, hiding and concealing identity, especially from co-ethnics – which is linked to shame and saving face – is particularly significant among Iranians who have experienced downward mobility or professional demotion. The immigrant generations' expectations of what life would be like in the US and Germany illustrates that economic and professional advancement was commonplace.<sup>9</sup> What is more, not having attained the professional lives and economic livelihoods they had envisioned becomes a source of shame, and avoiding other Iranians becomes a form of saving face. For the most part, if Iranians do not feel proud of what they have been able to professionally and materially accomplish in their host society, they are also less likely to want to interact with Iranians on a more deeper, intimate way. Some regard downward mobility as personal, individual failure, while others feel that other Iranians will not be compassionate or empathetic; in either case, experiences of downward mobility did not necessarily draw Iranians closer to each other. What is more, it was not uncommon to hear an immigrant-generation respondent refer to themselves as «nasle sukhte», the generation that burned<sup>10</sup>, when speaking of the dreams and goals they had set forth when they initially left Iran. Unfortunately, not forming relationships or relying on the community to help ameliorate the effect and impact of economic setbacks, or when experiencing marginality and discrimination, is disadvantageous; as many Iranians would benefit from the sharing and the utilization of the knowledge, skills, and resources that exist among Iranians in diaspora.

#### *A lacking practice*

Relatedly, some would argue that Iranians' lack of community reliance and community cohesion is also connected to their individualistic proclivities, especially as it pertains to a practice of participation and exchange. Individualism is not necessarily negative or problematic; a degree of individualism is necessary for the pursuit of personal goals and wellbeing. However in the case of many Iranians in diaspora, there seems to be an imbalance between individualism and communal practice. Many Iranians fault Iranian culture, as well as their familial socialization for not emphasizing the importance of establishing lasting ties and networks with other Iranians. Importantly, they cite instances when Iranians acted arrogant, prideful,

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9 Among the 32 interviewed immigrant generation Iranians in both contexts, the majority had attained at least a college, or four-year, degree either in Iran or abroad. This affirms the value and importance that is placed upon educational and professional mobility among Iranians in diaspora and in Iran.

10 This reference to being «a burned generation» also refers to those who participated in the 1979 revolution and then inherited a theocratic government, that they opposed, led by Khomeini. Some of the respondents felt that they lost everything in the revolution and their ensuing migration out of Iran.

superior, and egocentric toward them to highlight the difficulties they have had in establishing lasting interactions and relationships with other Iranians<sup>11</sup>.

Interestingly, Iranians' affinities toward individualism and a lacking practice of community cohesion did not solely emerge as they left Iran. It is reasonable to assume that the pervasiveness of western modernization ideology and practices, which highly value the individual, individual freedoms, and economic prosperity, that were institutionalized in Iran and the larger Middle East, influenced prior generations of Iranians decades before they migrated to western nations. In addition, the socio-political instabilities that arose during and after the 1979 Revolution and Iran-Iraq war created a sense of suspicion and distrust among Iranians in Iran and abroad. Unfortunately, some of these unresolved issues continue to plague some first-generation migrants as they grapple with «how their country got sold to the Mullahs», as they critique those that «participated in the Revolution and willingly handed the country to Khomeini based on their political naiveté», or ponder whether «the Pahlavi regime would have been preferable to the theocratic government in Iran». These unresolved discussions, and accounts of political or historical revisionism show up frequently in various Iranian social-cultural and political events; these political discussions, which seamlessly find themselves in many of the first-generation migrants' conversations, and can cause strife and separation among Iranians.

When we consider the historical impact of western ideology and policy, and the significant socio-political shifts after the Revolution combined with Iranians' migration and settlement experiences, it becomes obvious that creating and maintaining a practice of community is layered, nuanced, and complex. Some of the factors that keep Iranians from forming stronger communities are related to dynamics that were facilitated in Iran, other factors emerged during migration and settlement. What is more, the host society context further promotes the centrality of individualism and individual growth, rather than facilitating collective community building.

Ultimately, the factors discussed above, specifically, experiences of marginality, economic immobility, and a lacking practice of community cohesion significantly influence community-building dynamics. What is more, we see that experiences of displacement, marginality, downward mobility, or lack of belonging and membership have not necessarily impelled Iranians toward forming community with their counterparts. On the contrary, keeping distance from other Iranians have become pragmatic solutions for some Iranians, and a more permanent feature of their lives in Diaspora.

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11 Some Iranians argue that other co-ethnics display their economic or material success to «show off». Many of these respondents also felt that interactions and relationships with Iranians are generally not genuine and lack depth.

## Conclusion

Migration is painful, and it is nearly impossible to recreate home when your roots are elsewhere. The respondents who participated in this research painstakingly attempt to re-create a sense of home, quality of life, and belonging for themselves and their families in nations where they feel no birthright or inheritance. Dynamics outside of their control influence the extent to which they can belong. This cross-national research demonstrates that structural resources for class mobility, and positive interactions with host society institutions significantly impact Iranians' assessments about quality of life and opportunity. What is more, when Iranian ancestry is not marked, when it's not a stigmatizing factor, and does not pose a disadvantage, Iranians can come closer to belonging and membership. Ultimately, being culturally competent and integrated, while important, does not necessarily facilitate feelings of belonging and membership among Iranians living in the US and Germany. Rather, more significantly, it is having equal access to opportunity structures, quality of life, comfort, and being able to be a participating member of the host society that help facilitate experiences of belonging for Iranians in Diaspora.

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# Iranian Alliances across Borders

Iranian Alliances Across Borders (IAAB) started in the aftermath of 9/11 and the United States' wars in the Middle East. As the children of first generation Iranians in the United States, the heightened political atmosphere in the U.S. and the demonization of the Middle East made the absence of community organizations that could provide support and protection for Iranians in America all too visible. We began thinking of the seed of IAAB one year after 9/11, when the atmosphere in the United States had palpably changed: the Patriot Act had been enforced and hundreds of Middle Eastern and Muslim American men across the country had been rounded up. President George W. Bush's favored rhetoric of «us versus them» created a heightened sense of securitization and directly challenged Middle Eastern Americans to claim a position within its false dichotomy.

It was in this politicized environment, that Nikoo Paydar and I (Narges Bajoghli), moved to London to study for our third year of university. Landing at the progressive School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), we met each other and both experienced a level of critical inquiry and student activism against the war in Afghanistan and impending war in Iraq, that was still nascent on U.S. campuses. Crucially, we encountered a large group of hyphenated<sup>1</sup> Iranian students also studying at SOAS from the United Kingdom, Finland, Italy, Sweden, and Germany. Both Nikoo and I felt comfortable in our Iranian identity, but neither of us felt that we belonged to a particular Iranian community in the U.S. At SOAS, we began to see our experiences as first and second generation Iranians in the West in broader terms. Until that point, we had considered our «Iranianess» as something belonging to our parents that we partook in during summer trips to Iran or annual Nowruz parties. In London, we began to see ourselves as part of a diaspora for the first time. It was no longer about our parents being in exile – we saw that we could develop a space for those of us who had grown up outside of Iran.

In 2002–3, there was no sense of an «Iranian-American Community.» Some of the national organizations we have today were just beginning to emerge at that point. Beyond cultural organizations on university campuses that mainly held Nowruz events, there was no common understanding of being an Iranian in diaspora. There was no sense of a *diaspora community* nor an idea that hyphenated Iranians had a say in defining their own identity. There were numerous conversations about Iranians in exile, but nothing about the generation who was growing

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1 Collate with Amy Malek's contribution in this publication.

up outside of Iran. Who were we? Did it matter that some of us spoke Persian and others did not? Did it matter how old we were when our families left Iran? What if one of our parents wasn't Iranian – would we still «count» as Iranian? Did we share any traits as a community of young people? How important was Persian language acquisition to the maintenance of a community? In the U.S. context specifically, could we identify as a community of color? What was our position in respect to other minority communities in the country? Was our primary concern Iran, or did we have concerns in the U.S. that united us as a community? Instead of waiting for others to create this space for us to have these conversations and to organize, Nikoo and I decided that we were in a position to do something about it. We both felt a strong need for more opportunities for Iranians to connect and self-reflect back in the U.S. Importantly, we wanted to create a critical, but open, environment to look at our community and who we were – we wanted to move away from the stereotypes and seek out young Iranians pushing the boundaries.

We could not answer these questions on our own and we wanted to draw upon the experiences of those who had been thinking of these questions in myriad ways. For us, building a community started with conversation and thus we embarked on creating the First International Conference on the Iranian Diaspora.<sup>2</sup> We searched far and wide to find academics, artists, writers, musicians, journalists, and activists who were interested in similar questions about Iranians living abroad. The conference was a place to start the conversation, to pose the questions critically, and to put people who were thinking of similar topics in touch with one another. In a time before social media as we know it today, the space that IAAB's first conference provided was crucial, as many of our speakers felt they were working in silos before this event.

The first conference on the Iranian diaspora was a huge success. The energy in the room was magnetic. The conversations ranged from the role of religion in our homes, to domestic violence, gender roles, identity formation, parental pressures for «proper» career decisions, and the need to see the generation of Iranians raised in diaspora on their own terms. Having made that experience, Nikoo and I decided that there was enough interest beyond ourselves to create IAAB as a non-profit organization outside of the university and to work on it full time.

## Building the organizational structure

With no money and no experience creating an organization in the «real world», we spent long days in Barnes and Nobles where we could read as many «how to» books on creating businesses and organizations in the café without having to pay. The first conference had made less than \$600 in profit, and with that, we set out to create the organization's bank account and to register IAAB as an official not-for-profit. What we lacked in business acumen, we made up for in organizational

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2 April 2004 at Wellesley College and Tufts University in Boston, Massachusetts

structure and leadership development. Both Nikoo and I had partaken in leadership development classes and summer camps since high school and we held various leadership development fellowships at the university level. Since high school, we had been trained in organizing large events and managing people. Although we were no longer functioning in a school environment, those experiences were invaluable. Though we lacked the knowledge of the nuts and bolts of creating the legal structure of the organization, we were confident in our ability to create large programs for the community, to engage and encourage young Iranian Americans to work for their community, to create goals and timelines for IAAB, and to expand it.

From the moment we started working on IAAB, we incorporated a staff of six spread out over five universities along the east coast. Nikoo and I worked full time on IAAB while holding down another full time job (in the case of Nikoo), and a full time research fellowship (in the case of Narges), and our staff members worked more than 20 hours per week while all being full time students. Until 2009, IAAB functioned exclusively as a volunteer-based organization – even when Nikoo and I set up an office in the Washington, DC area in 2005, we only took a minimal stipend to help our transportation cost to the office.

Despite the fact that there was lots of excitement about IAAB and the work that we were doing, that excitement did not translate into financial success, for two reasons: 1) our age, and, 2) the lack of giving in the Iranian American community. In the U.S., not-for-profit organizations rely heavily on donations from individuals. Convincing individuals that they should give to an organization in which the average age of its staff in 2005 was 22 years old, was challenging, to say the least. We knew that it would take time to build trust and to demonstrate that IAAB would continue to do professional work and develop.

A bigger issue was the lack of a culture of financial donations for non-profit organizations in the Iranian American community. Unlike some recent immigrant communities where members had immigrated for economic reasons, Iranians in America tended to have a large number of individuals who were financially well off. However, in the early 2000s, that individual wealth did not translate into communal wealth. IAAB had the support of wealthy Iranian Americans from the start, but their donations were few and far between. Part of the reason was our age, but a bigger challenge that almost all Iranian-American organizations faced, was that our community was not yet used to donating to organizations to fortify the community. At a fundraising event hosted by Iranian American Wall Street investors in New York City in 2007, one prominent investor asked us after we made our presentation: «I made it on my own in this country. I don't understand why you all need help to make it here. You grew up here!» That comment was the epitome of comments we heard across the community from wealthy Iranian Americans at the time. It was difficult to explain the need for such an ephemeral concept as «community,» and to explain the benefits of having a community that could boast of success beyond individual pocketbooks. That attitude is slowly changing in the past five years as we have begun to see the first group of Iranians who have spent the majority of their lives in America give to the community's non-profit organizations.



We developed the organization to include teams for: Development (fundraising); Outreach; Program Teams (Conference, IAABart, Bam and Beyond, Project Connect, and Camp Ayandeh). We held weekly phone conversations with the entire staff, where every team would report their work to date; we had monthly status updates from every staff member that outlined the work they had done, what they needed more support for, and ideas for change; and we held quarterly staff meetings where we flew in all staff for a long weekend of planning and working, brainstorming about what the community needed and how we could fill a hole.

## Pushing the boundaries

In the first two years of IAAB's existence as a not-for-profit organization, we focused exclusively on furthering the conversation started in 2004, by creating another international conference. We continued to push the boundaries in our community and open the conversation to topics that were still taboo. In our second conference in 2005, we dedicated various talks to sexuality and the lack of acceptance of LGBT individuals in Iranian communities. We had audience members walk out of the conference during these talks and older members of our community question us harshly about featuring such discussions. But we did not back down – as an organization, our staff meetings included endless hours of tough conversations about the vision we had for an Iranian-American community. A key part of that vision was to be part of an open and accepting community. We talked about how we would receive pushback in the beginning for giving space to these discussions, but we were certain that it was necessary. Eventually, as the years went on, we incorporated all of these discussions around sexuality, socio-economic class, gender, and mental health into all of our programs.

It was in one of our staff meetings after the 2005 Conference that we began to create Camp Ayandeh. We were having a discussion about our vision for the future of the Iranian American community and our conversation turned to the fact that we had a hard time seeing a community in 20 years if we did not engage with youth and have them feel invested in being a part of a community. We studied other diaspora communities in the U.S. and saw that those with a strong sense of community 80–100 years since immigrating to the U.S. all had youth programs. The Jewish American, Armenian American, Hispanic American, Asian American, and Arab American communities were all communities that had built strong programs for their youth. It was during the summer camps for these youth that students from all over the country got to know each other and began to see a place for themselves in their larger community. These youth programs translated into strong networks for the students when they went to universities and later in the workforce.

We decided to create Camp Ayandeh, a camp for Iranian-American high school students, one that was not nationalistic in scope, but rather critical and with a foundation based on principles of social justice. We spent nine months traveling around the country and meeting with directors of summer camps that were critical in their pedagogy and had a strong track record. In the span of one year, we created Camp

Ayandeh and recruited for participants. We traveled to communities in the East Coast and sat in the living rooms of families with the hope of convincing parents to send their children to an unknown overnight camp run by 23-year olds. It was a daunting task, to say the least. We ultimately convinced some parents and 19 high school students from all across the U.S. registered in the inaugural year. Through a call for application, we received an impressive number of applicants for counselor positions. As an organization, we knew through personal experience, as well as what we heard from speakers from our conferences, that one of the main obstacles for youth was the pressure they received from their parents to follow traditional career paths. We had decided that the summer camp would be a space where the students had role models from all walks of life. We conducted multiple interviews with our applicants and chose counselors that were studying diverse topics, at a range of universities, and with diverse backgrounds.

None of us realized what an incredible life-changing program Camp Ayandeh would become. We started the week by discussing with the students what their vision is for the Iranian-American community in 20 years. We encouraged them to think big and to paint a picture of a community that they would want to be a part of. Those «vision statements» throughout the years are the guiding principles of Camp and IAAB as a whole. We encourage the students to think of how best they can create a community that is inclusive, open, and critical.

The first year was not financially successful, but the incredible bonds created that summer convinced us that Camp Ayandeh was essential for *creating* the future of the Iranian-American community. Ultimately, Camp Ayandeh breathed new life into the organization, thereby creating not only a highly successful and ultimately sustainable program, but also creating a mechanism for the organization to recruit and train young leaders. In fact, many camp participants continue to play leadership roles within IAAB long after their initial participation in the camp. Of the original eight counselors from the 2006 camp, seven joined IAAB's staff days after the camp's conclusion, including IAAB's Current Executive Director. In 2010, nine of the original 17 campers participated as camp staff and eight joined IAAB's volunteer staff.

While camp became a space for young Iranian Americans to define not only their identity, but also their role in building the community as its future leaders, we did not expect the many other issues that would surface as needs that must be addressed in the community as a whole, and in the camp's curriculum specifically. Over time, we incorporated conflict resolution, mental health, sexuality and gender, and bullying. Our youth, as first and second generation Iranian Americans, face many challenges and pressures both at home and in the classroom. As a result, our curriculum became more focused on identity and its impact on one's self-confidence.

We led campers in activities such as «Give it Up» in which our campers would identify aspects of their identity they suppress in order to be part of a space – such as their Iranian identity at school or social traits of being American when at home in their family life. Their counselors' lead critical discussions with the campers about what the erasure of their identity means to their sense of self. They learn about

the histories of other communities of color in the U.S. and what it means to build alliances with those communities for increased civic rights and to fight discrimination. Over the years campers also began to have many more questions about Iranian history and current events as fewer visited Iran and rarely discussed their family stories with their parents, who were less inclined to share given their own traumas as students leaving Iran.

Eventually, our youth began to openly and naively discuss their family's traumas and role in the Iranian revolution. Children whose parents were diametrically opposed during the Revolution became friends by participating in our leadership camp. Parents began to tell us that their children, after returning from Camp Ayandeh, would ask about their family's story and showed a new interest in oral history. In a sense, our community began to unite through its youngest members who became supporters and healers of their parents' political wounds.

Camp Ayandeh quickly became a necessary space not only in the Iranian-American context, but also internationally as we started receiving applications from youth living in Europe, Canada and the Middle East. Eventually our more than 150 campers hailed from more than 40 states, eight countries and three continents. No longer strictly second generation or even Iranian American, the changing demographics of the camps forced us to consider how to connect and unite campers who now no longer shared a national identity and common language. We began to question whether being Iranian was the only requirement or if the space could eventually open to non-Iranians. Could an American student act as a counselor and understand the experiences of Iranian-American teenagers? Could students from other marginalized communities participate in Camp Ayandeh? These are questions we continue to debate.

In the early years of Camp Ayandeh, we were concerned that an increase in participants would result in a dilution of its culture and family-like atmosphere. By 2010, we had more than quadrupled the number of participants and felt that we had a strong grasp on how to create the familial environment. The magic of camp no longer felt fragile and had now also been replicated by us in our student programs. With that in mind, we decided to create Camp Ayandeh *Javan*, Camp Ayandeh's sister program for middle school students. The possibility of creating a middle school camp had floated in the staff for years, but we were wary of bringing in such a young age group given the responsibility and hesitance we assumed parents had in sending their young children across the country to an overnight camp.

However, we ultimately decided to create the program because of the growing identity and confidence issues that present themselves in young people most during middle school. Our campers in Ayandeh constantly raised concerns about their experiences in middle school, an age when their peers showed the least empathy and when many young people experienced the highest level of bullying. We also learned that teenagers are often traumatized not only from direct negative experiences, but also when they do not take action to stop the bullying of their peers. We decided that the opportunity to educate and empower children ages 11-13 during a critical period in their development overshadowed the additional responsibility.

Our Javan youth could enter high school with a stronger sense of self and the capacity to act as advocates who could help shape their school's social environment for other vulnerable youth.

We did not foresee, however, that in creating Javan we would identify differences in the level of community engagement between the families of our middle school and high school students. We found that parents of Ayandeh campers were more likely to send their children as a last ditch effort to invoke Iranian identity in their teenage children. On the contrary, parents of Javan campers were oftentimes more active in their local communities and utilized Javan as a positive space in addition to Persian school and other cultural based activities such as dance and theater. Our Javan campers are more likely to speak Persian and take part in other Iranian spaces than our Ayandeh campers.

## **University programming**

As our youth program developed, many of us in IAAB realized that the strong sense of community that we were developing for high school students needed to continue in the university context, where students tend to become more socially and politically active. In 2008, IAAB created its first Student Summit, geared specifically towards university student leaders. The Student Summit initially brought together leaders from Iranian undergraduate student organizations across the country; however, it later incorporated both graduate student leaders and students not yet affiliated with Iranian student organizations. Other successful diaspora communities built much of their advocacy and direct-service strengths through university campuses. We realized that while many Iranian student organizations exist on campuses across the United States, very few engage programming beyond Nowruz celebrations and other cultural events.

Unlike other minority student organizations such as those serving Jewish and African-American students, Iranian student groups were largely inactive and had little presence on university campuses.

Iranian student organizations held an untapped potential both on and off campus as cultural hubs and direct service support groups. For example, they could provide support and services to waves of Iranian immigrants and graduate students facing legal and financial problems due to American sanctions against Iran; they could be a center for cultural celebrations in otherwise isolated local communities; and, they could act as cultural ambassadors and advocates during a time of heightened political tension. In reality, Iranian student organizations posed a slew of opportunities afforded to other similar communities through groups such as Hillel and Black Student Associations. A successful student organization can play the role of a cultural and community voice while protecting the rights of its members.

Iranian student organizations, while inactive, were left out of crucial conversations taking place on campuses across the country during a time when political tensions had begun to spread on campuses. One such example was David Horowitz'

Islamophobic ads that appeared in student newspapers campaigns in the mid 2000s. While our youth were the direct victims of the ongoing demonization of Iranians and other MEMSA communities<sup>3</sup> in the United States, our students could become our community's biggest advocates by having a voice, and that is what we sought to harness through IAAB's Student Summit.

Many within our generation negatively associated Iranian student groups as «party groups» that were a waste of their time and were otherwise involved as leaders in other advocacy and student government organizations. In order to be effective, Iranian student group leaders needed to connect with and engage other active Iranian-American students who already had experience in advocacy, community organizing and campaigning in a non-Iranian context. Such students shared their skills while Iranian student group leaders offered their knowledge in Iranian culture and community-building. Eventually, the Student Summit became a space for camp alumni to engage in as they graduated from Ayandeh and looked for ways in which they could participate on college campuses.

The cross section of Iranian student group leaders, students active outside the Iranian context, and camp alumni created an innovative space to discuss our community's issues and to develop platforms in order to address such pertinent issues. We created simulations in which we told students at the Summit that the US had declared war on Iran, a possibility that seemed very real particularly during the late 2000s. We asked our student participants to create a plan of action and response on behalf of the community. During one such simulation, the Summit participants realized that very few professional associations existed in the Iranian-American community and that there were no avenues in the United States through which the community could respond with a unified voice.

As a result, the 2010 Summit participants created IAAB's Campus Action Network (I-CAN), a network of university student organizations with the capacity to respond to and address pressing community issues. I-CAN has responded to various instances of discrimination both within and outside our community ranging from sending a statement about a discriminatory poster hanging in a Texas restaurant to taking action in a camp alumni-initiated photo essay project that conveyed messages of support and solidarity with queer Middle Eastern youth.

## Organizing parents and Persian language schools

While we had created spaces in which our students and alumni could continue to participate and develop, we regularly received feedback that there were still many challenges and obstacles that our youth faced elsewhere. In that spirit, we began to address challenges students were facing in the classrooms both at their mainstream schools and in their Persian heritage language schools. Oftentimes parents

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3 MEMSA is a term that refers to Middle Eastern, Muslim and South Asian communities.

would tell us that their children struggled most with their identity in their classroom. One parent told us, «*My daughter had to read Not Without My Daughter in middle school. She came home crying because her classmates ridiculed her for being Iranian.*»

We decided to build our parents' capacity to advocate on behalf of their children and to play a role in their children's education through a community campaign titled «Our Story: Addressing the Middle East in the Classroom.» Young Iranian Americans grapple with questions of identity and inclusivity every day in school as they face an increasing level of discrimination. We began to educate and encourage parents who otherwise could not relate to their children's experiences to become advocates for them and to help empower their children to access and take control of their narratives, to learn their histories, and to affirm their transcultural identities.

While these parents were younger and their families more well-versed in American culture and identity, they were just as helpless as our parents in guiding their children and helping them navigate a highly politicized and demonizing climate in the United States. We realized that their children no longer remembered a time prior to 9/11. They had no knowledge or understanding of what it was like for us to grow up in a country that didn't regularly blast discriminatory and demonizing stories from outlets such as Fox News. Our youth, while the children of parents who typically emigrated as students themselves, continued to share our generations' struggles combined with challenges unique to their generation. What was our generation's defining moment was the newest generation's norm.

We began shaping Iranian-American youth at a younger age through the space that often becomes their first entry point into the Iranian-American community: the Persian schools. We organized a network of Persian heritage language schools, researched their programs and assessed their strengths and weaknesses, and chose successful models to help advise us in a steering committee. We organized a weekend symposium, known as the Persian Language Educators' Symposium, that would bring together schools in order to share best practices, address challenges, and educate them on the unique experience of Iranian-American youth.

Unlike some European countries and Canada, the United States provides no funding or support to cultural institutions focusing on immigrant populations. Persian schools often struggle in creating sustainable models and educating youth. Teachers from Iran or parents often run the schools and they have limited understanding of the American school system, the experience of bicultural youth, and the expertise to teach Persian as a second-language. Instead of shaping their curriculum and approach around their student's experience, they demand their students to engage in models from Iran.

Our biggest hurdle in engaging youth in our programs was their dread of the Persian school experience. We had to reengage many disengaged youth by helping them overcome their troubling experiences from school. In 2012 we decided to go to the source and engage their schools instead, thereby increasing our impact and preventing youth from disengaging in the first place.

## Organizational Phases of Growth

As IAAB's impact grew in the community, so too did its visibility. Very few community leaders believed IAAB would exist past its initial student organization phase. IAAB eventually experienced three phases of growth:

- (1) its early years focusing on its formation and the creation of the Conference;
- (2) its middle years focusing on the creation of the Camp and Summit and the recruitment of a new crop of leaders through both programs; and,
- (3) its most recent phase focusing on organizational development and expansion into other youth and family spaces.

While IAAB's leaders were particularly well versed in understanding the diaspora community and how to shape it through deeply impactful programs, there was little interest or experience in building the organization's resources through marketing and development. Any marketing efforts were expressly with the aim of recruiting new participants for IAAB's programs.

IAAB's unique structure, while allowing for a healthy culture of democratic decision-making, posed a challenge in fundraising as the organization lacked major private donors who typically sit on traditional Boards. IAAB's success has not translated into strong sources of income, particularly from large private donors, despite its ideal status due to its extremely low overhead costs, high impact, and non-political nature.

The lack of private donors and larger grants resulted in our exploring other financial models as a staff. We created a system to assess the impact and financial health of each program shortly after its creation. Our philosophy was that we would front the costs of a potential program during its first attempt; however, if the program could not sustain itself after its first iteration, it could not exist in the future. We sought sponsors for our programs, kept our overhead costs extremely low since we each paid for our own travel and food during each event, and budgeted for each program in such a way that our revenue covered the costs. We priced programs low enough so that anyone could participate no matter their socioeconomic background and offered scholarships from our revenue.

During IAAB's second phase, one particular community foundation, PARSA Community Foundation, began investing small amounts in IAAB. PARSA was a foundation created by wealthy Silicon Valley Iranian Americans in order to fund Iranian community organizations that were otherwise unable to compete for funding from larger and established foundations. PARSA's leadership quickly found IAAB to be a successful investment despite its lack of connections and high-profile relationships because of its remarkable impact in the community. In 2011, PARSA awarded IAAB a \$300,000 grant to be given over a period of three years so that IAAB could hire one full-time and one part-time staff member with the aim of professionalizing and expanding the organization. We spoke with experts in the

nonprofit field and quickly began creating a plan for IAAB that allowed for a mixed paid and unpaid staff and focused on building the organization's resources and reach.

IAAB's grant from PARSA, however, presented two challenges for us. Firstly, the community believed that IAAB would lose its healthy organizational culture that relied on volunteers and democratic decision-making. Secondly, IAAB had to transform the community's general perception that IAAB was now well-funded and no longer needed donations. We still did not have a database of connected, wealthy and influential supporters. In fact, we still don't. We did however know how to organize financially sound programs. We began to focus our efforts on those most impacted by our programs to help us become financially sustainable and remain independent. All too often, organizations become unhealthy when relying on a traditional Board to fund them in exchange for the power to make decisions. We had become accustomed to others underestimating us including community members who believed that the grant would taint IAAB and negatively change its culture. Our overhead costs continue to remain low, our primary focus is still on creating impactful programs, and we rely on volunteers and a mixture of paid and unpaid staff to maintain IAAB's visibility and reach in the community. In the last year, we've begun to develop relationships with a few private major donors who see our positive impact in the community through someone connected to them.

IAAB now relies on its grassroots fundraising efforts, lean programmatic structures that ensure sustainable financial models and the generosity of its participants and their families who directly benefit from IAAB's work in the community. IAAB's paid and unpaid staff is comprised of active and engaged Iranian Americans from various sectors who participate in their local communities, thereby providing an accurate map of the community's cultural environment and the challenges Iranian Americans face on a local and regional level. IAAB's quarterly staff meetings play a key role in determining the issue areas IAAB will focus on annually and on a long-term basis.

After ten years of educating and empowering youth, we now have students playing leadership roles and participating in virtually every organization, industry and field of study. Our alumni continue to remain engaged in IAAB and support the organization, though we are still ten years away from our alumni being financially successful enough to become major funders.



YALDA ZARBAKHCH

# Sitting on the Fence or Straddling it?

DIWAN – German-Iranian Encounters

«Mummy, will we go to Iran some time?» From when I was in kindergarten, I remember asking this question again and again. The response was always the same: «In a year or two, maybe.» Those two years turned into twenty, but finally it happened – I was able to visit my «home country.» But was this really my country, my home? Or was it only the land of my parents? At least I had been born there, in Iran. However, I only spent my first few months in the country. Still, according to the stories I was told as I got older, I lived through a lot during this brief period.

So, is all of this not so much my story but the story of my parents? And what happens to you if your experience is by proxy? What was the cause of this powerful feeling of homesickness and longing for a country that I did not know at all?

Because, let's face it, my home country is Germany and my command of the German language is much better than that of Persian. Although, from a young age, I had many Iranian friends, we only spoke German among ourselves, and the same was true with my brother and with the cousins my age. Persian was always the language of family affairs, for *mehmunis* (meetings and ceremonies) and *tarof* (acts of courtesy) towards the adults, or for political debates. However, all the things that were crucial for us as we were growing up – lovesickness, parties, puberty, friends, etc. – could only be experienced, felt, and expressed in German. This went so far that even with my cousin in France it was easier to speak French than Persian – and that despite the fact that all of us did learn to read and write Persian (in so-called «mother tongue classes» and rather against our will). Each year, for *Norooz* (new year), this sufficed to send postcards to our grandparents in our terrible third-grade scrawl, and, on my first visit to Iran, I was at least able to make out the street signs.

Generally, though, I felt very uncomfortable speaking Persian outside of my family. And whenever I did, I was exposed after only one sentence (something that used to embarrass me): «Oh, you're from Isfahan? You've certainly got the twang.»

The result was that I had even less nerve to speak Persian while, on the other hand, this subconsciously re-enforced the feeling of belonging to a foreign place, one whose idiom one had acquired by birth and without ever living there. Today, I like my Isfahan accent as much as the accent of Cologne, where I live. To get to this point, however, it took a long and arduous path.

The more paradoxical – for me and for my fellow humans – is the question about identity, which is often posed in terms of nationality or origins. In Germany, it is fairly common to be asked such questions – something I never experienced in a negative or discriminatory way but as curiosity and interest in others – the more so, as I am always interested in the cultural background of the people I encounter. However, I never answer this question by saying, I'm German and almost always tell people that I'm Iranian. Maybe this is because I sense that any other answer would negate the expectations of those asking the question.

Yet, during my first visit to Iran, I learned that this is not quite true either. The country felt foreign and familiar at the same time, and this made me feel somewhat German – or at least not just Iranian. One could argue that this is typical for someone caught between two countries... but I never liked this notion with its negative connotations that imply that there is a lack of belonging, or a *failed* effort to belong – something that can never change as long as there is a state of in-betweenness. Instead of sitting on the fence, I always like the notion of straddling it – and this is exactly the image that inspired me to get involved in DIWAN.

## What is DIWAN?

Around 20,000 Iranians reside in Cologne and the surrounding areas. By that measure there used to be a noticeable lack of programmes and events that appealed to the second and third generation of the Iranian diaspora, meaning, people with a background and self-image similar to the one described above, that is to say, people like myself – people with «hybrid identities.» There were no viable organisational structures, something like a Goethe Institute, for example, that were independent of Iran and focussed on the entire Iranian diaspora in Germany or even Europe.

It was this, which inspired Ali Samadi Ahadi, a renowned filmmaker and director and the founder of DIWAN, when he began to sense this deficit after the birth of his daughter, and especially as she got older.

At first, after I moved from Frankfurt to Cologne to attend university there, I did not want to get involved with the local Iranian community (if you can call it a community). I did not want to be part of a circle of exclusively Iranian friends and thus of people who want to stay among themselves, something that frequently happens.

At the same time, and largely unconsciously, I constantly tried to introduce my non-Iranian friends to Iranian culture and the Iranian mentality. However, there were no locations, no events compatible with the «non-Iranian part» of me.

What was lacking was some kind of intermediate space, something to bridge the gap between the numerous Persian parties and shows, on the one hand, and the many political events organised by older associations and lobby groups, on the other – and while the latter may have been quite interesting, such events rarely addressed the second generation and were thus of little interest to it.

This began to change somewhat in 2009, when the Green Movement led to political and social changes in Iran. The year 2009 and what happened in Iran resulted in a number of new developments among the Iranian diaspora, and among other things it caused an, at least temporary, rapprochement between the many fragmented groupings and groups of exiled Iranians. My very tentative phrasing is to indicate that there is still a long, long way to go before we can have any kind of sustainable reconciliation between the numerous political parties and groups of exiled Iranians.

Against this background and atmosphere of wanting to participate, to identify, and show solidarity with the young people in Iran, the DIWAN association came into being. In 2007, Ali Samadi Ahadi had considered the idea of an Iranian Diaspora Foundation and, two years later, this resulted in an initiative backed by many well-known, younger Iranians such as Golineh Atai, Navid Kermani, Ali Samadi Ahadi, Isabel Shayani, and Jasmin Tabatabai – people who had made their name in the media, the arts, and academia. They were the ones who gave DIWAN its unique profile, thus pulling it out of anonymity. The result was that DIWAN, unlike many other Iranian associations, did not fall apart (or had to be dissolved) after only a short period but, by now, has existed and expanded for almost six years.

Within a fragmented exile community that is characterised by a high level of mistrust, people and groups are quickly pigeonholed and all developments stifled by a toxic fog of suppositions, insinuations, rumours, and hearsay. Such reflexes and discursive strategies have to be understood against the background that led to their rise. Exiled Iranians, especially those of the first generation, tend to mistrust one another because of the events that drove them into exile, because of the political history of Iran, and because of their personal and collective stories that are marked by experiences of betrayal, loss, spying, and ideologies with all their divisive consequences. The fact that from the very start DIWAN was supported by a number of well-known individuals made it less vulnerable to such attacks and rifts (although they still occurred).

My generation has grown up with all the historical baggage and references, and for us this has been formative. The crucial difference is, however, that it only affects us indirectly. We have not been through all of this – with the result that the second generation of the diaspora is heterogeneous, that it *knows about it*, and that these factors will influence its actions and decisions. We also tend to dissociate ourselves from others while, at the same time, longing for communalities and community. In 2009, when I first heard about DIWAN and met some of the people involved, I realised immediately that this was what I had been missing: cultural engagement and negotiating your identity with other Iranians, mostly of the second generation, that is, people with a similar self-image yet differing approaches towards *being Iranian* – people willing to use their professional skills and influence to close a gap and create joint projects not exclusively aimed at Iranians but, as indicated by DIWAN's tagline, «German-Iranian encounters,» that is, a type of organisation that also embraces this other part of our identities. One long-term goal was to create

a space for encounters, a building and home for DIWAN and for all its members and non-members. There still is a long way to go.

When we founded DIWAN, we were just 20-plus people. Today, we are around 120 members in Cologne alone, plus 50 in our new associated group in Hamburg. Those are substantial numbers for a cultural association in Germany, and even more so, considering the fragmented nature of the Iranian diaspora. Thanks to its members, DIWAN was able to organise over 70 events, large and small, during its first four years. One of the highlights was the year 2013, when over 6,000 people attended our music festivals in Cologne and Hamburg. Except for a few representatives of the first generation, hardly any of the members knew about how to run a charitable organisation and, consequently, much of what we did was learning by doing.

Early on, many of our events and activities focussed on what «being Iranian» meant for each of us, and this issue engages us to the present day. What are we – German? Iranian? German-Iranian? People with a migration background? Or people who are multicultural, assimilated, or overly integrated? Such conflicting allegiances and identities may be a burden to some; however, the aim of DIWAN is to explore multiple identities as sources of creativity and productivity, that is to say, as something that may spawn new cultural phenomena, identities, and expressions. A good example is DIWAN's annual WALDA celebration that merges Christmas with the Iranian Yalda festival.<sup>1</sup>

As part of our self-reflection we continue to investigate our relationship with the «old home country» and try to understand what we share with and what divides us from people of our generation in Iran.

In 2011, DIWAN organised a conference that lasted several days («Zwischen den Zeilen. Iranisch Sein 1979–1390»)<sup>2</sup> and invited artists from the international diaspora as well as from Iran. The aim was to show the development of arts and culture in Iran and within the diaspora, discuss mutual influences, and experience how art addresses the generation gap. Such events and the encounters they produce always prompt self-reflection and thus constitute an important tool for building communities.

After what happened in Iran in the summer of 2009, a wave of young Iranians left the country. Many, who came to Cologne and the surrounding areas, initially were enthusiastic about DIWAN and its programmes, and some became more or less involved. For us this was a great gain, and many things came out of such productive encounters. However, initial enthusiasm often faded and many of the new arrivals turned away. There are probably many reasons for this, above all individual ones, still, it shows, that within our own generation personal aims, ideas, and identities tend to drift apart in ways that are not all that difficult to understand.

However, this raises the question about what distinguishes the actual emotional conditions of exile and diaspora. One fundamental distinction is the meaning we ascribe to the «old home country,» including our questions and expectations.

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1 Yalda is an ancient Iranian festival celebrating winter solstice, the longest night of the year.

2 The year 2011 is in the Persian calendar 1390 (editor's note).

Many of the Iranians who went into exile in more recent times are very much focussed on the «old home country,» probably hoping that they will be able to return soon, while, for «diasporic» Iranians, Iran figures mainly as a type of background music that, at times, may amplify and at others fade away.

In this context, one factor is especially challenging for an Iranian cultural association, the question of how political we may or shall be. What is the role of politics in Iranian culture? Is it possible to distinguish between cultural and identity-based activities and, if so, what are the demarcations? Each day we notice that the boundaries are blurry. An example was the conference mentioned above about Iranian arts, culture, film, and music of the last 30 years. Is there such a thing as non-political art, especially in an Iranian context? What speakers and artists may we invite from Iran or the international diaspora without causing trouble for Iranians when they return, or for exiles when they want to visit? On top of that is always the danger of being accused of organising an event that is either too overtly political or too apolitical. Basically there is no way to define, once and for all, how to navigate this fine line, and it will have to be renegotiated each time depending on the actual situation and circumstances.

The fundamental tenets of DIWAN are not political. We believe that culture is a decisive driving force within society, and that this is reflected on all levels, including the political. A look into Iran's recent history shows that many socio-political events and phenomena – including how the Iranian diaspora came about – were caused by and correspond to cultural developments and aberrations. Yet culture is also able to connect people, and cultural activities may bridge ideological divides, bring supposed enemies together, and inspire people to tolerate others. For us, in the diaspora, the reconciliation of different groups and generations is an existential concern. If cultural activities are the balm to «heal» old wounds – and this is what we believe – then we should apply it.

During its first two years, DIWAN organised numerous events large and small, among them readings, concerts, film screenings, festivals, and conferences. This was not undertaken just to establish our name but mainly to raise the funds we needed for our DIWAN culture centre. Occasionally, some members criticised this approach, as they feared that it may turn DIWAN into nothing but an organiser of events and make us lose sight of all our other aims.

Another recurring issue is that of our audience and, respectively, of what programmes we want to offer? Is it glitzy events for an elite audience – or do we want to engage in social work, supporting children and youths, offer homework tutoring, and cheer up seniors in their nursing homes? Isn't every community based on the willingness and capability to serve the social interests and needs of its members?

The answer is that we have to do a bit of both. An increase in membership also means a higher number of wishes, ideas, and priorities – and there is nothing wrong with that, as it makes us constantly re-evaluate all the things we do. Everyone is welcome to come up with new ideas or programmes, and to see whether they can be implemented with the support of others and the resources at hand. This is our philosophy at DIWAN. This is how we established our annual camps for children

and youths, our Persian classes, our DIWAN choir, and our series of round table discussions titled «Otaghe Gerd» (the round chamber), an idea we adopted from the Berlin-based group Simorgh. The aim of these talks is to listen to one another, to let others have their say, and, at each meeting, to discuss a relevant social issue.

We also established an internal *Otaghe Gerd* for conflicts within the organisation, as we had noticed a lack of democratic debate within our ranks, meaning a lack of openness towards others' arguments and too little tolerance towards antithetical positions, something that should be part of any orderly and productive debate, which results in decisions accepted by all. The round tables offered us a framework for debating strongly divergent points of view while following strict formal rules. Thus we were able to establish a tolerant and democratic mode of debate and make this our second nature.

After only two years of work we faced additional challenges: On the one hand, there was the issue of *transparency*, that is, how to make decisions within the existing structures that others will have faith in, on the other, the question of *participation*, and the shortcomings of the existing structures regarding the participation of a growing number of members and contacts.

These realisations were the beginnings of a new, ongoing process, which has been very instructive and productive for all involved.

In view of these developments, we revised DIWAN's statutes. Until they were finally passed by the general assembly, numerous discussions had to be held, an arduous process that took up a year and a half.

Over time, we also established a «strategy circle» in addition to our board, that is, a type of advisory body consisting of association members active within our working groups. This advisory body has become an important part of our structure, letting those who do most of the work participate in decision-making. As a consequence, decisions are supported not just by the five to seven members of the board but by between 20 and 30 active members.

The new statutes also established the working groups as bodies of the DIWAN association, and these working groups (for events, media, organisation, finances, and communication) may in turn form their own working groups, enabling non-members of the association to participate in programmatic activities. These changes, undertaken over the course of two years, were important, however, other changes to DIWAN's structure were almost as important, namely the development of rules of procedure that made the way we operate transparent to outsiders.

To have such an organisational structure is crucial. Operating transparently and according to formalised procedures that create a framework of trust helps fend off latent mistrust from inside as well as outside. Over the years, it became apparent that we ourselves were not completely immune to such mistrust in stakeholders and institutions, as instances of this would crop up again and again. One example is the founding of our Hamburg «branch.» About two years ago, an initiative for a DIWAN branch in Hamburg had sprung up, and this had led to a number of internal debates. Initially, this initiative had been operating under the auspices of its «parent organisation» in Cologne, yet it soon became clear that for strategic as well

as administrative reasons an independent Hamburg association with its own structures made more sense, for example, as this would facilitate co-operation agreements with the Hamburg state government and its institutions.

However, this decision only came about after lengthy and controversial debate. Why? Were we afraid to let go of something it took us a lot of work to set up? Didn't we trust one another? Or was it because we were unwilling to relent our power to decide on the association's outlook, its programmes, and future development – or because we were afraid that this would mean a reassessment of everything we had done ... maybe only to find that we were unable to do so? On the one hand, such questions that arise because of actual issues offer food for thought and point to aspects that define patterns of thinking and acting, which, in turn, influence the interactions between individuals as well as institutions of the Iranian diaspora. Discussing such questions enables us to recognise the issues and reflect on them. On the other hand, this also points to the potential persistence of certain patterns of distrust across generations – patterns that in some cases may even continue into the second generation. Nevertheless, by working together with others there is also the chance to re-evaluate certain fears, assumptions, personal experiences, and experiences that were handed down to you – and thus to question some of the patterns that drive our actions and behaviours and to develop new and better ways.

DIWAN Hamburg was finally founded and registered as an association. However, although its statutes are identical to those of its counterpart in Cologne, it is a very different organisation. For one, the average age of its members is much lower than in Cologne, and this results in very different projects and programmes. The existence of a second DIWAN association in another city has given us the chance to implement many new projects, for example the music festival «New Sounds of Iran,» that only became feasible through collaboration with the Cologne Philharmonics and the Hamburg Elbphilharmonie, important institutional partners that enabled us to realise such an expensive undertaking. What is even more important, is that a sister association means regular communication about lessons learned, something that helps us avoid mistakes and gives us access to one another's resources and networks.

DIWAN's principle of sharing responsibility and of handling problems in a process that is collective and ongoing is probably the best way of building community structures within the Iranian diaspora. Only if all our voluntary members view the association as their association and a project they feel at home with, will it be possible to motivate them. Voluntary commitment differs from a professional career in that the latter may offer good income or status to compensate for shortcomings, while the former is wholly based on trust, interpersonal relationships, communication, and the joy of working together.

However, the issue of trust within the Iranian diaspora goes beyond internal organisational structures. For all diasporas, the place one left behind is a fixed point of reference. By fleeing in their millions, Iranians tried to escape the despotism, lack of transparency, and pervasive fear used by the Iranian regime to stifle civil society and all forms of personal autonomy. Things that are possible in Iran today

may be outlawed tomorrow. Everything you do may have negative consequences in the future. Again and again, we observe that Iranians, when they fled their home country, didn't leave behind these debilitating mechanisms that create permanent uncertainty. The long arm of the regime reaches all the way to Berlin, Cologne, Los Angeles, London, and Toronto – and into our associations and circles, that is to say, into the places where we organise and get together, and this, in turn, has an impact on what we are doing abroad. Many people who are an active part of civil society do not want to compromise their ability to visit Iran once in a while, nor do they want to become a target of the regime's despotic policies. The consequence is that we ourselves are in permanent danger of reproducing in exile what we are opposed to in Iran – self-censorship and social isolation.

One key factor for the growth and success of DIWAN has to be that we seek to address and engage others in ways that are positive and open, something many of us shirk elsewhere. This is the crucial factor: We have to face up to who we are, to our cultural background, our often conflicted past, and to divisions between as well as within the generations. We have to use our freedoms to break down the walls of silence and talk to others – trying to understand them, trying to listen to them, and trying to tolerate their views. This is a journey with many waypoints and occasional changes of direction that have to be embraced. All of this is part of what we do in our association – it is one comprehensive process of learning. All the day-to-day activities, the organising of large and small events, media work, membership drives, petitions, finances, board meetings, working groups, and so many more make it easy to forget that our association is about trusting one another, about working together, and about participating in civil society through actual collaboration. Working within «Iranian» associations and organisations thus offers ideal conditions for building and growing sustainable community structures, that is to say – let me reiterate: building trust, democratic participation, and transparency.



# «Sometimes we're very noisy, sometimes rather quiet»

**An Interview with Asghar Eslami, Association for Communication,  
Migration and Refugee Assistance (Kargah)**

*Mr. Eslami, please tell us, why did you leave Iran for Germany?*

Already, during the rule of the Shah, I was a member of the left, democratic opposition, and I continued with my commitment during the revolution of 1979. The bloom of democracy and the anti-monarchist movement only lasted for a very brief period. Right after the Islamic Republic took power, repression began against all dissidents – and this repression extended into all spheres of life, be they political or cultural, and it also affected other religions or the way women dressed.

In December 1982, after having lived underground for a year, I fled Iran, and via Afghanistan and Pakistan I got to Frankfurt airport where I applied for political asylum. Shortly after, I went to Kassel and from there to Hanover. I knew Hanover rather well, back from the time between 1969 and 1978, when I had studied architecture and the sociology of architecture there. When protests against the Shah came to a head in 1978, I returned to Iran to be part of the democratic protest movement. Then, when Khomeini took power and dissidents were being persecuted, all I could do was flee the country.

*What were the experiences during your early days in Germany that made you consider founding an organisation?*

You probably know that before the revolution there was a sizable Iranian student organisation abroad, the Confederation of Iranian Students, National Union (CISNU). These students campaigned against the regime of the Shah, and later many of its members, who were part of the democratic left, formed the opposition against the Islamic Republic. CISNU formed a network across many countries and cities, including Hanover. Add to that a high number of political refugees, many of them very knowledgeable and experienced in organising activities. Back then, the political atmosphere was not welcoming for refugees, and you did come up against a lot of hostility for refugees and migrants. There was little tolerance for «foreigners» – not only in day-to-day life but also among politicians and officials. Even back then, we, the Iranian refugees in Hanover, had a number of political, intellectual, and also material needs and issues. Consequently, the question was, how do we regroup in this country, and how do we rally and pool our people in order to possibly achieve a return to Iran? Intellectual issues were important too, such as: Where can we get

access to books? Where learn the language? Are there places where we can meet just among ourselves? Plus: Who will help us with paperwork? How do we find accommodation? – and many more. Those were the things that concerned us. However, our most urgent need was to have a political dialogue among Iranians and to organise political action against the Islamic Republic.

The way in which Kargah developed shows what practical responses to these issues may look like.

To begin with, we tried to build an exclusively Iranian network for capacity building in Hanover. The aim was to grow according to our capabilities and also to work with other groups of migrants and refugees and with politicians. To do this, we needed official status, our own offices, and a politically conscious collective of people who shared democratic ideals, spoke the same language, and were also able to resolve differences of opinion in a democratic fashion – and in ways that result in political action. Our aim was to pursue common political goals, as well as advocate for the interests of those who survived by fleeing the country, yet wanted to continue opposing the regime by organising political meetings.

On top of that, we wanted to get the Iranians living in Hanover together and build ties to other groups and networks, in order to be able to fight the Islamic Republic and inform the German public about persecution, human rights violations, and executions in Iran. In doing this, we began to notice that, on certain relevant issues, we didn't have the books we needed, and therefore we started collecting books and documents. Those were the beginnings of what became the Iranian Library and our centre for documentation. Initially, our meetings were held in the storeroom of the Internationalist Bookshop, and that is where we put up some shelves and collected around 500 books. Today, we have 19,000 books and documents about Iran and other relevant areas.

*This sounds like a balancing act. On the one hand, Kargah deals with German institutions and structures to support Iranians in this country, and, on the other, you are focussing on Iran, hoping you'll be able to return soon. How did you deal with this tension?*

Back then we believed that our sojourn in Hanover would be short. We all sat, so to speak, on packed bags and expected the days of the Islamic Republic to be numbered, and that we would be able to return within days or months [...] and later we thought that, maybe, it'll take five or ten years. We were very much convinced that, almost over night, something may happen in Iran and we'd be able to return very quickly.

The distant and negative attitude politicians and officials took towards us – and especially towards those who were politically active – increased our desire to return back home even more. Also, it made us think that nobody wanted us here and made us look for some kind of safe nook at the margins of urban society. During the first five years, our group was mostly self-absorbed and only addressed a purely Iranian community. This meant that we could focus even more on Iran and our political activities. At the same time, we began to notice that more and more refugees arrived

in Hanover, and that they needed support – people, who helped them with the German authorities, helped them find accommodation, etc. So, in addition to our political group that focussed on Iran, we created a self-help group – a group that helped Iranian refugees with their most urgent needs. One reason for this was that we didn't want these refugees to become dependent on groups like the monarchists or the mujahideen. We also offered German classes for those interested.

Around this time, we also began to notice that the Iranians who had already been living here as refugees needed counselling on social and family issues and other kinds of professional support. There were troubled relationships, marriages on the rocks, and domestic violence. Therefore, we tried to open an advice centre and also find other ways to support people with such troubles, including co-operations with women's shelters, with other counselling organisations, and with legal aid. Against this background we created the «Refugee Aid Fund,» in order to be able to provide financial support to those in need. In doing this, we took a democratic and emancipatory approach, which sometimes led to conflicts with perpetrators of domestic violence, as we had to take the side of the victims. Still, after years of doing this, we did become a trusted institution within the Iranian community.

*What were the consequences for the further development of Kargah?*

Kargah has seen continuous development. New project areas were added and made accessible for other refugees, too. Kargah has become a meeting place tailored to the immediate needs of refugees and migrants, and today this is what defines our operations, including activities on issues such as integration, migration and refugee policy, and job hunting. This is the direction into which Kargah gradually developed – it transformed from an association purely focussed on Iran, into one tackling the social needs of refugees and migrants, including but not limited to those who want to get involved in political and social activities.

In 1986, Kargah was registered with the authorities, namely, the Hanover district court. Initially our official name was «Iranische Gemeinde in Hannover»<sup>1</sup> (Iranian Community of Hanover). Back then, to us the term «Gemeinde» just referred to community work, and we thought that this would be a good description for our activities with the Hanover Iranian community. From the very beginning, «Kargah» had been the association's Farsi name.

In the late 1990s, we changed our officially registered name to Kargah – for two reasons: One was that we had noticed that often the term «Gemeinde» made the German public and German authorities and institutions think of us as a religious group. This, however, was a meaning we hadn't intended. Also, «Gemeinde» may imply that we intended to represent the interests of all Iranians in Hanover. Again, this is something we couldn't do – and didn't want to do. The term «Gemeinde» suggests a unity that doesn't exist in reality. The fact that we celebrate the same festivals on the same days and speak a common language doesn't mean that we share

<sup>1</sup> The German term «Gemeinde» can denote «community»; however, it is more commonly used to mean «congregation» (editor's note).

the same interests or political positions, or that we as Kargah may represent such positions – and that despite the fact that our social and cultural activities are open to all Iranians. However, our programmes are also open to others, as, over the years, Kargah was transformed from an Iranian association into an intercultural one.

*Which of your programmes and services are targeted at specific groups and their interests – meaning, by implication, that they exclude other groups and points of view?*

For example, Kargah doesn't organise religious events – no matter what the religion. There are certain red lines that may not be crossed and certain positions that we defend. We do take sides, for example, in favour of the interests of refugees and migrants and in support of a democratic and anti-racist community of values.

The same is true regarding democracy, freedom of speech and expression, the rights of woman, and human rights. Because of that we are a political organisation. We oppose the Islamic Republic Iran – but we also oppose the return of a corrupt monarchy like that of the Shah, or of any similar kind of system. We support the idea that human rights are universal, we identify with all people who strive towards democracy, and we do support their local activities as much as possible. This is the reason why we can't be a lobby organisation for all Iranians living in Hanover; still, all of them may of course participate in our programmes. Nevertheless, we do stand for our values and our political and cultural convictions.

The majority of Iranians who founded Kargah were political activists belonging to the Confederation of Iranian Students, an organisation I mentioned earlier. For years, they fought against the Shah, and they are staunch anti-monarchists. These members of the political opposition were not able to return to Iran because they were persecuted by the Shah. Then there were those who, because of discrimination or persecution, had to flee the country after the revolution of 1979. Our supporters and founders were members of the left, democratic opposition that fought for something like a Democratic Republic Iran. This is the political background that informs our basic stance up to the present day.

*Does that mean that somebody who supports the monarchy may not be part of the association?*

To put it precisely, if people come to us, for example, to use the library, no one will ask them about their political beliefs. To have certain political convictions, is no precondition for participating in our programmes or some of the other activities. There are numerous discussion meetings, readings, cultural and leisure events – and they are open to all. The same is true for our daily counselling, educational, and job training sessions as well as our aid programmes. They are independent of political beliefs or nationality. However, as I said before, we also take sides.

For example, if someone asks us for support with their asylum application, and then tells us that, for many years, he has been a member of the Islamic Republic's oppressive power structure such as the Revolutionary Guards, or of SAVAK, the Shah's secret police, and that he has been involved in torturing people, then we will not offer this person our support. There are other places in Hanover they can turn

to. The same applies to all other refugees and migrants, no matter where they come from.

We can't offer our resources to people who persecuted others, oppressed and, possibly, even tortured them. The same applies to people that use violence against members of their family. There are a number of issues on which we take sides and have a very clearly defined political stance. Still, we also offer mediation sessions, provided both sides agree to mediation.

*In what ways have Kargah's goals and programmes changed over time? Have you become less political, as Iran became an increasingly remote factor?*

Kargah still is politically active. Over the course of three decades, Hanover has become the centre of our lives, and consequently our political outlook has expanded. Initially everything was focussed on Iran and the Islamic Republic, and we had little to no idea how things such as democracy, human rights, equity, and many other important values may be realised in Iran's multi-ethnic society with its religious fundamentalism and patriarchy, once the Islamic Republic had fallen.

It took us members of the «left opposition» a long time to grasp that it is essential to respect and recognise the Charta of Human Rights, and that equal rights for women and men alike should not be viewed as a distant proposition but is something that needs to be realised in the here and now. Reality has shown us that a very long time may pass before we are able to return to Iran. Yet, no matter how long it takes, we should never keep quiet about the Islamic Republic and the fate of the people of Iran. This same attitude informs our solidarity with other peoples around the world. Also, we have developed a new sense of belonging. Everything that happens in Hanover, in Europe, or around the world affects us. As I see it, Kargah has evolved over the last 35 years, however, in the process, it has not become apolitical.

This is why today the fate of all the refugees, who seek shelter and a future for themselves and their families in Europe, is something that concerns us, as well as the fate of those suffering from persecution or domestic violence. We are trying to open our programmes to all migrants and refugees whose experiences are similar to those of Iranians in exile.

We are offering specific programmes in a number of areas, among them counselling and support for refugees, counselling for people without documents, for victims of domestic violence, and in cases of forced marriage. We also offer training courses and continuing education, political education, as well as language classes, job training for a number of different career options, computer and music classes, etc. The aim is for people to feel at home in Hanover. We offer classes in 15 different languages. The framework for all of our activities is human rights and democratic diversity.

This shows that the range of our activities has widened considerably, and there are many burning issues, especially in the area of migration policy, we actively engage with. We have excellent networks in Hanover and beyond, extending to groups active on the same issues, yet with all kinds of different cultural backgrounds,

for example the Network Migrant Self-Organisation, numerous education providers, neighbourhood groups – but also political parties, trade unions, and human rights organisations.

*In what ways do Kargah's activities reflect your immediate environment, Hanover? On what issues do you engage with the city and its political and social actors?*

There are numerous ongoing political debates and conflicts in Hanover, for example concerning the monocultural nature of many of the educational programmes and on how politics and authorities operate. We have developed a website in 14 languages ([www.welt-in-hannover.de](http://www.welt-in-hannover.de)), and, until the end of 2016, we are planning to expand it to 20 languages. As regards local community work, we've commissioned a number of artists to redesign two playgrounds in Hanover's Linden district and turn them into antiracist, democratic, diverse, and multilingual meeting and learning spaces for children and youths. We support diversity and want future cities to be colourful and open to all.

A short while ago, we translated street names in the area near our Kargah Centre in Hanover's Linden district into other languages – to show that Hanover has over 170 languages, a diversity politics and the authorities should take into account. This led to massive controversies with some of the political parties, especially the CDU and SPD, and for a whole week it made the headlines in the local papers.

Right now we are in the act of establishing the website [welt-in-hannover.de](http://welt-in-hannover.de) as an alternative to the city's official website. We believe that the diversity that is Europe – and which is promoted by the EU – has to be expressed in certain ways. As an Iranian I think of my culture and language as part of this city's cultural landscape – as something that makes life in this city more colourful. Consequently, I want to see my culture and language reflected in the city.

*Are the political developments in Iran still an important influence on Kargah's present activities?*

Political developments in Iran are still very important to us. For example, as part of our work and in collaboration with others we try to react to what goes on in Iran in ways that are at once sensitive and specific. In co-operation with other leftist and democratic Iranian groups we protest against the Islamic Republic. The main issues are and have been human rights, political prisoners, religious and cultural minorities, executions, the everyday discrimination of people by the regime, the situation of workers, and many more. During the 37 years of the Islamic Republic there have always been protests. We are part of the opposition, and we demonstrate against the brutalities that are being committed on a daily basis against all those in Iran who love freedom and show their dissent.

Sometimes we're very noisy, sometimes rather quiet. However, no-one's ever managed to silence us – neither during the mass executions that took place in 1988–89, nor during the student protests of the late 1990s, nor when students in Tehran were attacked in their halls, nor when Bahá'í were arrested, or when Kurds were executed. During the presidential election campaign in the summer of 2009,

when mass protests took place because people were outraged about election fraud, we supported the activities of the leadership of this movement – despite the fact that we were quite critical of them and their lack of democratic credentials as, to us, they were part of the Islamic Republic and represented an element that propagated a return to the times of Khomeini.

Some of the young Iranians who, in 2009, protested in Hanover in support of the Green Movement also sought the help of Kargah. We tried to support them as much as possible and organised some debates in which we also presented our positions and our critique of the Green Movement. Some of the young people who came to us at the time still play an active role within Kargah.

We still aim to strengthen resistance against the Islamic Republic in other parts of the world. At the same time, however, we have widened the scope of our activities. Today, we do much more to address social issues in Germany and elsewhere. This marks a major change compared to what we did in the 1980s.

*The exclusive orientation towards Iran and the related political activities no longer dominate Kargah's everyday activities. The dream of changing Iran has been challenged by the reality of living in Germany. You yourself describe this as a personal process of change. How would you relate this experience to the wider developments of the past few decades? Where's the «political» first generation today? Where's the second? And how did this change come about?*

When discussing this, I think we have to recall that well into the 1990s the Iranian government tried to undermine and sabotage the opposition at home and abroad – and often with success. What also looms large is, of course, the way the opposition organised, its visions of the future and of democracy, and the way it viewed the Islamic Republic Iran.

In addition, during the rule of the Shah, as well as after the Islamic Republic took over, the totalitarian conditions in Iran meant that the opposition never had the time to establish democratic structures within its own organisations or to make democratic institutions and practices part of its activities. All of this enabled the regime to smash the opposition very quickly, and this was followed by ideological infighting and schisms, with the result that there were a few hundred small groupings. This paralysed any kind of organised effort to build a political opposition outside of Iran. However, despite those dark times, there is oppositional activity abroad, and we try to be part of it as much as our possibilities permit.

This is the only context within which I can speak about the Iranian opposition, namely, the opposition outside of Iran. It's not possible to compare the things we can do here, the way we can live our lives, with the conditions faced by the opposition inside Iran. In Iran, dissidents are faced with a fanatical system, and they are subject to ruthless and brutal persecution, arrest, discrimination, and even assassination.

Furthermore, the first generation of Iranians that found refuge abroad consists of older people – the average age today is over 60. Some people of this generation find it hard to integrate into their country of immigration, and it seems that this is more difficult for men than women. Often, they have little in common with the second

generation, as it consists of people that are less affected and that do not have the same political sensibilities towards the Islamic Republic. The two generations do not speak the same language. Yet, in spite of these difficulties, we still try to find common ground.

For some of the reasons mentioned, it is very difficult for members of the first generation to find their bearings in «uncharted waters,» while the second generation, which was born here, or grew up here, has become part of this society. They have the same needs as other young people here, and, for most of them, political issues or a purely political way of dealing with the Iranian system is a fairly abstract undertaking, as they lack any actual and direct relationship. They are not burdened down by actual experience, and they were not able to build a relationship to the generation that had to flee the country. There is a generation gap, and this has done much to transform things.

The older generation of Iranians living abroad has gone through a lot, and it has lost a lot – emotionally as well as materially. Many have resigned and are aging. They are focussed on the past and in a state of torpor. Most of them have no active, hands-on ties – neither to Iran, nor to this society. They are somehow in limbo. For many people of my generation the ties to Iran and Iranian society have a dreamlike quality – largely they exist in the mind only. To me, this is one of the fundamental problems of Iranians in general: They are trying to resolve all social evils, be they here or in Iran, in their minds, and they dream up visions, or sketch them out on paper, or find someone to blame – instead of trying to resolve issues by applying themselves to actual social reform.

I am stunned that with something like two or three million Iranians living abroad – and considering the intellectual and financial resources in the cities where they reside – there are little or no efforts to build actual networks between them, or to build bridges to the societies in which they live and develop practical models of living together.

We have not succeeded in maintaining actual organised networks in the cities where we live and within the day-to-day structures of our existence (instead of some fantastic virtual «Iranian community»). What's more, it doesn't even matter whether such networks aim to champion Iranian issues or issues to do with the life and the needs in the new country. At Kargah, we engage with both worlds – with Iran, and even more with German society and all the other cultures that surround us. We have daily communications with Iraqis, Syrians, Turks, Afghans, Russians, Ukrainians, and Vietnamese, and we debate and argue about political developments, but we also work out our shared collective interests, which we then try to push with politicians and city authorities.

The great majority of Iranians abroad label and view themselves as political refugees, meaning they fled for socio-political reasons, and they are often referred to as the «elite» of the country. This background makes it the more remarkable that this «elite» is unable to unite, in order to get directly involved in the social and political processes that inform its immediate environments, or to become an active political force in other ways. What strikes me is the amount of indifference.



There are many individual success stories. However, very rarely do I come across efforts towards the common good of the community, whatever form they may take.

*Are Kargah's programmes of interest to the second generation? Does it feel attracted by what you do?*

The second generation of Iranians outside of Iran – and this is also true in Hanover – is neither a uniform group, nor is it organised. Regarding education, counselling, and support it has the same needs as other people their age. Our experience shows that they tend to identify with where they live, and that they have no political ties to Iran. Their ties to Iran are above all family ties and, to a certain degree, there are also cultural links.

A number of Iranians of the second generation are very active members of German political parties or in the administration of all kinds of projects – however, they have few links to Iranian groups. Some members of this generation are interested in politics, and those are the ones we are in touch with. However, during festivities such as *Chaharshanbe Suri* or *Nowruz* the second generation tends to take the lead, meaning that some of the young people show occasional interest in our activities. The new generation of refugees, most of which are younger than 27, does show a lot more interest in our activities and does become much more involved in Kargah.

We also offer tutoring for young people, something much in demand from all nationalities. Then there are the Persian lessons that are popular with some of the Iranian youths, and some of them even attend with their non-Iranian friends. Young people also tend to use our library a lot, and they attend festivities, cultural events, and readings. However, the political discussion meetings on certain issues are much less popular with teenagers, and it is rather the 20 to 30-year-olds that attend and participate. We also have a weekly German-Iranian TV programme, and the young people produce this. Finally, we offer internships, and, once they've finished their university degree, some young people apply.

*Is there much demand for a specifically Iranian community? And what could be the purpose of Iranian community building?*

Of course it's important that there are structures in place to advocate for certain everyday social interests and needs of Iranians and to be able to engage with political and social institutions on an equal footing. Also, we want to understand our history and culture. I, for one, want to see that my Iranian roots, my language and culture, and the ensuing interests and needs are recognised by politics and society. This means, for example, to recognise *Nowruz* as an important holiday and to excuse my children from school that day. In order to practice, preserve, and pass on the Iranian language, as well as our cultural practices, traditions, and literature, it is useful to have organisational structures and representatives that support such programmes and that are able to lobby for assistance and endorsement. All these are things a powerful Iranian lobby could help with.

Also, there is a high number of young Iranians, many of them university students, who had to flee the Islamic Republic in the late 1990s or after the Green

Movement. Most of these young people are well educated, but once they go abroad it is back to square one for them because their university degrees are not accepted elsewhere. What if we had an Iranian lobby with the resources and a global network to support an institution such as, for example, a Free Iranian University that would recognise those achievements and allow people to get their degrees – with the result that this generation of Iranians would be able to realise its potential. Also, there could be scholarships and other grants supporting academic research into Iran – which would likely lead to a reappraisal of Iran's recent history. The same is true for refugees from other cultures. Just imagine the distress of millions of Iranians who had to leave everything behind in Iran and who had to start from scratch in a foreign country in order to earn a livelihood. This highlights how important it would be to have a solid endowment fund to support people who have to start all over again and, at the same time, give them a chance to lobby for their interests.

As I mentioned before, Iranians outside of Iran have many important social, economic, and domestic interests that require counselling and support. To achieve this, we need decentralised support groups – and right now they are few and far between. If necessary, these support groups can work together, for example to counsel refugees. However, I don't think we need some sort of bogus council calling itself «Iranian Community.» What we do need are actual local, functioning interest groups that may then create a wider network and tell others about their experiences.

*It seems that you distinguish between interest groups and a community.*

What I'm interested in is the question, why do Iranians need such a community as an umbrella organisation? Who are the Iranians such a community is supposed to represent? What do we have in common – and what are suitable democratic tools to represent our common interests? Will this be a political body, a semi-political, or an apolitical organisation? And what will be the relationship between this body and the Iranian government and its embassies? What will be its position on human rights, imprisonment, torture, and executions in Iran? As long as we're unable to answer these questions, the idea of a community as an umbrella organisation is not feasible. We can't adopt the model of the Turkish, Spanish, or Greek community in Germany, as they evolved from a different history with different experiences. Those people initially came here as «contract workers» – that wasn't the case with us. Our history is very different – and so are our experiences here.

A possible comparison is between us and the refugees that came to Germany from Latin American countries such as Chile. Very many of us are political refugees with ugly experiences of the Islamic Republic, and this group of refugees is still being persecuted by the regime. Members of the Iranian opposition propagate the overthrow of the regime, whether actively or passively. Many Iranians, on the other hand, are able to visit Iran, and, even if they are opposed to the regime, they tend to keep a low profile and don't voice their views in public. Plus, there are also supporters of the regime that live abroad, as well as business people who trade with Iran. It is not possible to reconcile this whole mishmash of interests.

When you look at existing Iranian communities abroad, they're all in touch with the Iranian embassies and consulates – and thus the government. We, however, are dissidents, we reject the government. Because of Iran's recent history, the idea of a comprehensive Iranian community is almost impossible and definitely much more complex than that of an interest group. I think a community of Iranians living abroad is not conceivable without entering Iran into the equation. There will always be an overlap. As I mentioned before, against this background and because of Iran's recent history, there will always be certain divisive issues – and Iranians living abroad will take sides. For example, if I talk to other Iranians and mention something about human rights, there is a chance that someone will say, «Stop talking about that! I've got to go to the consulate next week, and in two weeks time I'll be travelling to Iran. Therefore, leave me alone with your human rights!» Well, if that's the case, we don't have much more in common than our language and *Nowruz*.

All of this shows that the term «community» is really fraught with problems, at least when understood in a comprehensive way. Interests or traditions and festivals such as *Nowruz* or *Chaharshanbe Suri* and things to do with language and culture are being interpreted in ways that differ from location to location and on a scale that ranges from political to apolitical, with some groups regarding them as purely economic activities. If all there is, is to preserve and teach the language, it is not necessary to have a community association. We already have many language teachers, even different language teachers' associations, each with its own teaching method.

In contrast to a comprehensive community that tends to be a mishmash of interests, an interest group, ideally, tends to focus on the narrow and clearly defined interests and issues of a certain group of people. Even such an interest group is all but easy to establish, as it is very tricky to limit the group's agenda and clearly define the issues at hand. When you're sitting down with Iranians of my generation to launch an interest-based or issue-based organisation, most participants will try to turn it into an organisation that represents their complete personal history. All the ideas and dreams – especially their dreams – that the Islamic Republic took away from them will have to be reflected by one and the same structure, and there is always the subconscious reflex to create an organisation based on the whole range of their own interests and dreams. For them, it is impossible to achieve anything as long as not *all* their interests and dreams have been acknowledged – and it doesn't matter what type of organisation we're talking about. As a consequence, it is almost impossible to find common ground. In all those personal and painful histories, each word has so many connotations that every phrase will be perceived as a betrayal of someone's interests.

For me, this means that although the term «interest group» stands for an approach that is more realistic than that represented by the term «community,» it is still a formidable challenge to define a focus area that is sufficiently tangible and delimited to become the working basis of such an organisation.

Of course, from a formal point of view, each and every Iranian group may officially call itself «Iranian community» – and this may even be a very viable and

successful organisation. However, it won't be an organisation that represents the interests of all Iranians living abroad but rather one association among many.

*What is your impression of the Iranian associations and groups in Germany?*

Whatever the organisation or the focus area, as long as Iranians just deal with their issues and desires in a way that is often rhetorical and fanciful, and as long as they fail to create democratic institutions and structures from the bottom up – organisations based in a very pragmatic way on the basic necessities of our everyday existence and surroundings – as long as this is lacking, all type of organisation will remain fiction. It is not enough to register an «Iranian community» and issue press releases listing things that have not yet happened but will have to happen [...] raising the question of *how* all this is supposed to happen? – what are the means and who will be in charge? Those are nothing but mind games, castles in the sky with no connection to our actual everyday realities and environments. What we need are actual, active nodes that are immersed in the everyday realities of the different cities and countries.

The activities and efforts of Iranian groups outside of Iran have been of little account. Hardly anything has passed the test of time, and it is very hard to find any kind of professional organisation or lobby group – be it in sports, in education, or be it political, cultural, and social panels – that have had a lasting influence and produced results.

I just don't know of any examples. Local associations and activists seem to have little interest in networking with others regarding certain specific issues. Kargah, as a small local group, has managed to build a network with organisations from other countries and cultures. Maybe we have even gone far beyond that. We founded Kargah as a capacity building group for Iranians; today it is a truly intercultural association with employees from 22 different countries. We are well connected in the Hanover region and within the State of Lower Saxony, and we co-founded some networks such as MiSO (Network for Organisation's Run by Migrants). In these areas our collaborative efforts work very well.

At the same time, we have always tried to co-operate with Iranian groups across Europe on specific political issues to do with Iran and the Islamic Republic. It is hard, however, to find groups that are professional and operate in a sustained manner. Even within small networks active on only one or two issues, much time is needed to find a common language. To create Germany-wide networks with participants that lack previous experience with such networks takes a lot of trust, will power, and time. It is not hard to imagine, what would happen if a Germany-wide or even a European Iranian community organisation were to be created; even prior to any concrete steps, such a project would be fraught with problems and haunted by conflicts.

It would be a start if, at least, we could get the few interest groups active in a number of cities on social, cultural, and political issues to form a network, so that they would have a mutual knowledge of each other's expertise and resources, which,

in turn, would enable them to share these and to support one another with their different projects.

Such common forms of co-operation – no matter what the subject or the area – lead to certain routines and make people trust one another, something that is of great importance, and which forms the basis for community-building and for projects that are much larger in scope. Imagine what we at Kargah have learned over the course of 30 years, what our resources are and our level of experience of how to deal with politicians and the authorities here in Hanover. How can we share this with other groups in other locations?

Once we start working together on specific projects, and once we begin to support one another, this may, over time, become the basis for an Iranian network.

*Based on your experience of working with an association, what are some of the main challenges in interacting with Iranian organisations and Iranian individuals?*

For example, some time ago we launched a fund to support migrants and refugees in need, which since has collected 20,000 euros. The aim is to help people who had to flee without any papers and who require legal aid, etc. So, we asked for donations, and we distributed an appeal using our networks. Afterwards, we were dumbfounded when we realised that people from a wide range of cultural backgrounds had contributed, some more, some less, but that there was not a single Iranian among them. And these are funds that are also available to Iranians in need [...] which must mean that Iranians are unable to grasp why such a fund is needed and that it presents a resource available to them and their compatriots.

Why is it that Iranians frequently have to contact me, asking for money because persecution has left them with mental health problems, and they desperately need 150 or 200 euros? A fund is something that is available to everyone in need, meaning people in need don't have to demean themselves by begging for money because, instead, they're able to apply for support. And the larger the fund, the more people can be supported.

Iranians seem to be unwilling to do their bit for the welfare of the community, including their own compatriots, and what little will there is seems to vanish as soon as they're not hard up themselves anymore. The means are there. We Iranians like to revel in our individual stories of success, brag about our riches and the positions of power we've gained in politics, culture, and the world of business. However, whenever we try to create, establish, or support Iranian institutions or organisations I see very little of these same people. The few Iranian groups that aim to promote the common good, and which support Iranian refugees and help traumatised political refugees, are struggling to survive.



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Donya Alinejad** is a lecturer at Amsterdam University College, the joint Liberal Arts Honours College of the University of Amsterdam and Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, teaching courses on digital media, migration and identity, and ethnographic research methods and epistemologies. Her research interests include migrant identity politics and the use of social media applications in everyday life, social movements, and self-formation. She holds a PhD in Social and Cultural Anthropology from the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam.

**Judith Albrecht** recently completed her doctoral thesis titled “Images of Women Between Islamic Norm and Secular Practice: Female Members of the Iranian Elite as Transnational Actors (Berlin, Tehran, Los Angeles).” Ms. Albrecht is a social anthropologist who has also worked as a documentary filmmaker. Her research interests are Iran, Libya, and Tanzania, and her thematic focus is on gender and Islam, visual anthropology, diaspora, cultural memory, conflict, violence, and social movements. Currently, she is a post-doctoral fellow at the Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Free University of Berlin. Her most recent research project has the title “Muslim Environmental Discourses and Practices.”

**Narges Bajoghli** is a PhD candidate in socio-cultural Anthropology at New York University and a documentary filmmaker in NYU's Culture and Media Program. Narges' research focuses on pro-regime cultural producers in Iran. She is the director of *The Skin That Burns*, a documentary film about survivors of chemical warfare in Iran. The film has screened in The Hague, Hiroshima, Jaipur, Tehran, and in the U.S., at festivals and university campuses. Narges is the co-founder of the non-profit organization Iranian Alliances Across Borders (IAAB), and has also worked extensively with NGOs in Iran and Latin America (Cuba, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica). Narges has curated and organized art exhibitions and exchanges in the United States and Iran, and serves on the Board of numerous organizations. Narges has written for *The Guardian*, Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), *The Huffington Post*, *LobeLog* and *IranWire*. She has also appeared as a guest commentator on Iranian politics on *DemocracyNow!*, NPR, BBC WorldService, BBC Persian, and *HuffPost Live*.

**Asghar Eslami** was born in 1944 in Isfahan. After taking his A levels, he worked for steelworks and for waterworks in Iran. In December 1969, he went to Germany where he studied architecture and political science. After taking his degree, he returned to Iran in the summer of 1978 to promote democracy in the country.

However, the “spring of freedom” was brief, and soon dissidents were suppressed and persecuted. With no alternatives left, he fled to Germany in December 1982. From 1987 until 1994 he was research assistant for the Green Party in the parliament of the State of Lower Saxony. Since 1994 he has worked for a number of educational organisations and has headed the Kargah association. Today, the centre of his life is Hanover, where he resides with his family, promoting co-operation, acceptance, and tolerance, however, he still has a powerful longing for the people and places of his youth.

**Halleh Ghorashi** is Full Professor of Diversity and Integration in the Department of Sociology at the VU University Amsterdam, the Netherlands. She is the author of *Ways to Survive, Battles to Win: Iranian Women Exiles in the Netherlands and the United States* (Nova Science Publishers, 2003) and Co-editor of edited volumes such as, *Paradoxes of Cultural Recognition: Perspectives from Northern Europe* (together with S. Alghasi and T.H. Eriksen, Ashgate 2009) and *Muslim diaspora in the West: Negotiating Gender, Home and Belonging* (together with H. Moghissi, Surrey, Ashgate, 2010). She has published extensively on topics such as identity, diasporic positioning, cultural diversity, and emancipation with the particular focus on the narratives of identity, migration and belonging in the context of growing culturalism.

**Ramin Jahanbegloo** is a political philosopher. He received his B.A. and M.A. in Philosophy, History and Political Science and later his Ph.D. in Philosophy from the Sorbonne University. In 1993 he taught at the Academy of Philosophy in Tehran. He has been a researcher at the French Institute for Iranian Studies and a fellow at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University. Ramin Jahanbegloo taught in the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto from 1997–2001. He later served as the head of the Department of Contemporary Studies of the Cultural Research Centre in Tehran and, in 2006–07, was Rajni Kothari Professor of Democracy at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in New Delhi, India. In April 2006 Dr Jahanbegloo was arrested in Tehran Airport charged with preparing a velvet revolution in Iran. He was placed in solitary confinement for four months and released on bail. He is the winner of the Peace Prize from the United Nations Association in Spain (2009) for his extensive academic works in promoting dialogue between cultures and his advocacy for non-violence and more recently the winner of the Josep Palau i Fabre International Essay Prize.

**Mana Kharrazi** is the Executive Director of Iranian Alliances Across Borders (IAAB). Mana first joined IAAB in 2006 and has led the organization since 2008. Under Mana's leadership, IAAB has grown into a leading Iranian-American community organization and has been featured on CNN and CNN International, The Washington Post, Huffington Post and PBS Frontline's Tehran Bureau. Mana was a steering committee member of the Iranians Count 2010 Census Coalition (ICCC) and a member of iBridge Berlin Conference's US organizing committee. Mana was a Field Organizer at Amnesty International USA, focusing on campaigning and organizing



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**Cameron McAuliffe** is a Lecturer in Human Geography and Urban Studies at Western Sydney University. His research engages with the regulation of difference and disorder and the way cities govern «marginal» bodies and includes work on identity, cultural diversity and transnationalism. He has critiqued the methodological nationalism of transnationalism research in papers in the journals *Global Networks* and *Australia Geographer*, and published book chapters on religious and national identities in the Iranian diaspora. Cameron holds Bachelor's degrees in Arts (Human Geography) and Engineering (Chemical) as well as a PhD in Human Geography, all from the University of Sydney.

**Sonja Moghaddari** is a doctoral student at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva. She did her undergraduate studies in anthropology at Hamburg University and at Aix-Marseille University, where she earned her master's degree. The German-Iranian defends migrants' rights in different associations in Germany, France, Spain and Switzerland since 2006. In her studies, she explores Iranian migration in its multiple dimensions. She is the author of *Migrations et modernités iraniennes: Les familles transnationales* (2015).

**Resa Mohabbat-Kar** holds an MA in political science and cultural anthropology from the University of Hamburg. He has been in charge of numerous research projects, has worked for political campaigns and for international conferences on human rights, political activism under authoritarian regimes, Iranian politics, and the Iranian diaspora. Mohabbat-Kar worked with NGOs on web-based human rights initiatives, and was active on issues such as access to information, civil-society engagement, and good government. He has advised government agencies and public institutions on the strategic use of digital technologies and new media for political communication, as well as on foreign policy and «digital diplomacy.»

**Sahar Sadeghi** received her doctoral degree in Sociology from Temple University in 2014. She is currently a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Muhlenberg College. Her areas of specialization and research include race and ethnicity, migration and transnationalism, inequality and power, and Iranian immigrants in Diaspora. Dr Sadeghi's current research focuses

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**Manuchehr Sanadjian** is a British citizen of Iranian descent. Born in a south-western town in Iran. Sanadjian initially studied economics in Tehran and was subsequently trained as a social anthropologist in Oxford, UK. He has taught and carried out research both in Iran, Britain, and elsewhere in Europe. Sanadjian's area of interest covers contested identification in diaspora. He is currently an honorary research fellow at the Department of Social Anthropology in the University of Manchester.

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## **Identity and Exile**

### The Iranian Diaspora between Solidarity and Difference

Over five million Iranians in exile – about 120,000 of which live in Germany – are influencing political and cultural debates in Iran on a daily basis, for example via social media. But the Iranian diaspora is very mixed, and it is split along ideological, as well as along social, ethnic, and religious lines.

This fragmentation of the Iranian diaspora impedes the formation of a collective identity and obstructs the ability of Iranians in exile to organise and act as one. The aim of this publication is to promote a process of reflection within the diaspora and provide an input concerning the role and potential of the diaspora community in the US and Germany as well.