

# Iranian Americans

Immigration and Assimilation



© 2014 Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans, except in the case of quotations in news articles, critical articles, or reviews. Please direct all inquiries to:

Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans  
1001 Connecticut Avenue, NW  
Suite 745  
Washington, DC 20036

April 2014

This report was compiled with the assistance of Jessica Emami.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

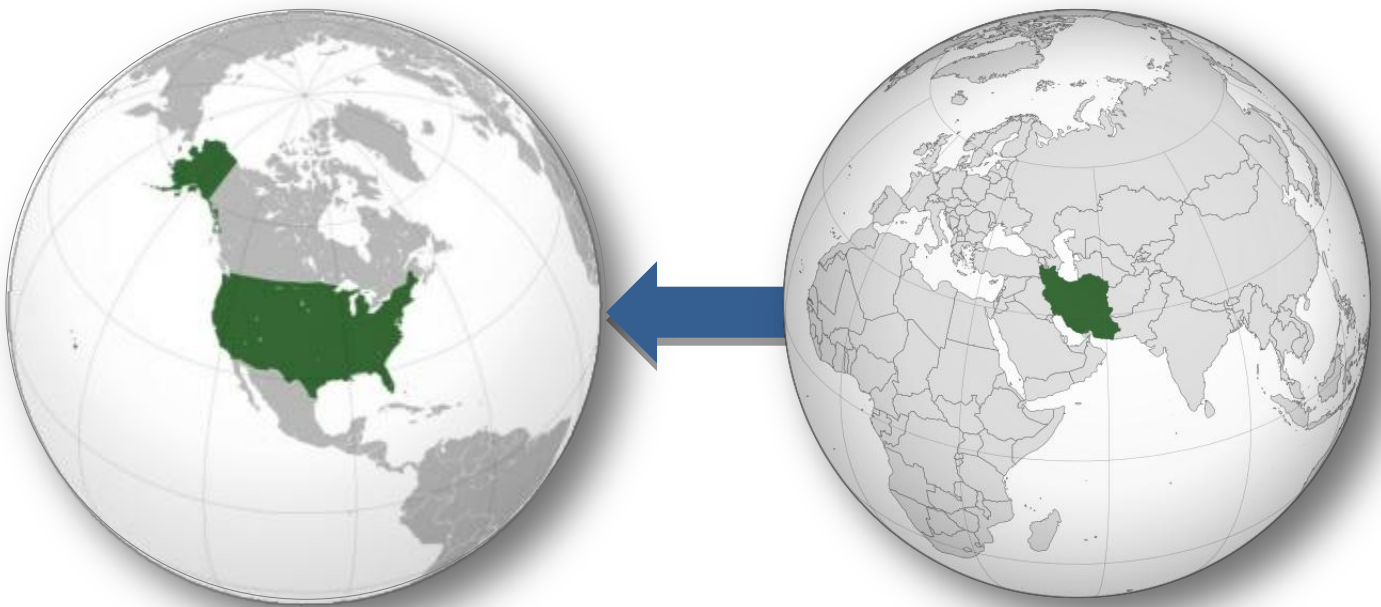
<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>WAVES OF IMMIGRATION.....</b>	<b>2</b>
The First Wave: 1950 - 1979 .....	2
The Second Wave: 1979 - 2001 .....	1
The Third Wave: 2001 - Present.....	3
<b>ASSIMILATION: PATTERNS AND CHALLENGES .....</b>	<b>4</b>
Self-Identification.....	5
Cultural Observances .....	7
Ethnic Diversity .....	9
Language Proficiency.....	10
Intermarriage.....	11
Spatial Concentration .....	11
Socio-Economic Status .....	12
<b>WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?.....</b>	<b>13</b>

## INTRODUCTION

For nearly two centuries, since the first Iranian immigrated to the United States, the history of Iranian Americans has been evolving. It is a history of a people immigrating to a new country in search of opportunities for advancement and freedom. It is the story of individuals and families putting down roots in an unknown land and successfully melding their ancient heritage with the culture of their new home.

Though the Iranian American assimilation process has been similar to that of other immigrant communities in the United States, it has faced unique challenges, primarily, the result of ongoing tensions between the United States and Iran. As a matter of fact, the legacy of Iranian American immigration is intimately tied to the pre- and post-revolutionary political relationship between the governments of the two countries, with key events in Iranian history impacting both the numbers and profiles of Iranian immigrants admitted to the United States, as well as their ability to assimilate.

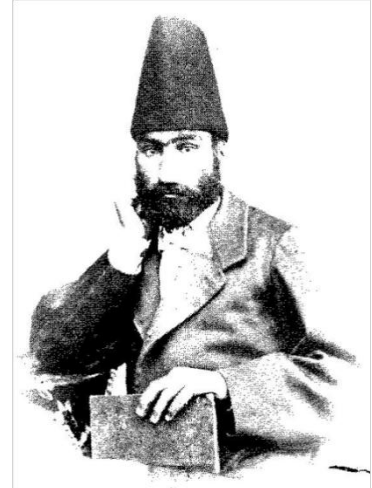
Yet, with perseverance and hard work, the Iranian American community has effectively addressed these issues and continues to prosper and grow.



## WAVES OF IMMIGRATION

The first known Iranian American is Mirza Mohammad Ali, better known as Hajj Sayyah, “The Traveler.”<sup>1</sup>

Born around 1836 in Mahallat, a small town in Iran, Hajj Sayyah embarked, at the age of 23, on a journey around the world that lasted 18 years. Beginning in Central Asia and progressing through Europe, he arrived in New York around 1867. For the next ten years, he traveled throughout the United States, absorbing the country’s culture and methods of governing. He met with President Ulysses S. Grant and, on May 26, 1875, became an American citizen, the first known Iranian in history to do so. After his return to Iran in 1877, he became one of the first Iranians to urge that democratic reforms be instituted by the Iranian government. For the remainder of his life, Hajj Sayyah actively participated in Iranian politics, campaigned passionately for improved living conditions in Iran, and went on to play a major role in the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906. He died in 1925.



Since then and as noted in the table on the following page, hundreds of thousands of Iranians have followed in Hajj Sayyah’s footsteps. Available data shows three major waves of Iranian immigration to the United States. The first occurred between 1950 and 1979, the second, from 1979 to 2001, and the last wave from 2001 until the present day. **Figure 1** on the following page provides details on the number of Iranian Americans who were admitted each year between 1960 and 2012 and the total number of Iranian American immigrants in the US during that year.

### THE FIRST WAVE: 1950 - 1979

From Hajj Sayyah’s time through the mid-twentieth century, Iranian immigration to the United States remained a very small-scale phenomenon. Only 130 Iranians are known to have immigrated between 1842 and 1903.<sup>2</sup> From 1904 to 1924, the number was insignificant, so much so that Iranians were not even recorded as a separate category of immigrants in United States immigration statistics.<sup>3</sup> Within the next quarter century from 1925 – 1950, existing records show that nearly 2,000 Iranians were admitted to the United States as immigrants.<sup>4</sup> However, it was not until 1950 that the first major wave of Iranian immigration to the United States began.

<sup>1</sup> Ali Ferdowsi, “Hajj Sayyah,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, XI/5, pp. 556-60, and XI/6, pp.561; available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hajj-sayyah> (accessed online at 26 June 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Bozorgmehr, Mehdi and Douglas, Daniel (2011) ‘Success(ion):Second Generation Iranian Americans’, *Iranian Studies*, 44: 1, 3-24, p.10.

<sup>3</sup> *Handbook of Research on Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship: A Co-evolutionary View on Resource Management*, edited by Leo Paul Dana. Northampton, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2001, 246.

<sup>4</sup> Bozorgmehr and Douglas, “Success(ion),” 10.

IRANIAN AMERICANS  
IMMIGRATION AND ASSIMILATION

**Figure 1 –Iranian American Immigration (1960 – 2012)**

Year	Iranian Immigrants admitted that year	Total Iranian Immigrants in U.S.	Year	Iranian Immigrants admitted that year	Total Iranian Immigrants in U.S.
1960	429	3459	1987	14426	152993
1961	471	3630	1988	15246	168239
1962	601	4231	1989	21243	189482
1963	705	4936	1990	24977	214459
1964	754	5690	1991	19659	234118
1965	804	6494	1992	13233	247351
1966	1085	7579	1993	14841	262192
1967	1414	8993	1994	11422	273614
1968	1280	10273	1995	9201	282815
1969	1352	11625	1996	11084	293899
1969	1352	11625	1997	9642	303541
1970	1825	13450	1998	7883	311424
1971	2411	15861	1999	7203	318627
1972	3059	18920	2000	8519	327146
1973	2998	21918	2001	10497	337643
1974	2608	24526	2002	13029	350672
1975	2337	26863	2003	7,251	357923
1976	3731	30594	2003	7,251	357923
1977	4261	34855	2004	10,434	368357
1978	5861	40716	2005	13,887	382244
1979	8476	49192	2006	13,947	396191
1980	10410	59602	2007	10,460	406651
1981	11105	70707	2008	13,852	420503
1982	10314	81021	2009	18,553	439056
1983	11163	92184	2010	14,182	453238
1984	13807	105991	2011	14,822	468060
1985	16071	122062	2012	12,916	480976
1986	16505	138567			

*Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service,*

Between 1954 and 1960, Iran, benefiting from increasing oil revenues and economic and military support from the United States, underwent a period of economic, social, administrative, and agricultural reforms that were aimed at modernizing the country. These revenues and the accompanying reforms and economic growth, however, resulted in inflation, a foreign trade deficit, and a decrease in the value of the *rial* (the Iranian currency). To combat these problems, the Iranian government launched massive industrialization campaigns that changed the role of the private sector in the country's ongoing economic development. Banks, both public and private, began providing reliable sources of credit, allowing for the establishment of large-scale private manufacturing enterprises. The government made significant investments in building and repairing roads, bridges, seaports, highways, and dams. New agricultural operations, particularly in the meat, fruit, and dairy sectors, were established. Between 1968 and 1978, the country attracted foreign investment and imports, resulting in an increase of nearly 500 percent in Iran's construction, gas, and oil industries.<sup>5</sup>

These increases in public spending, oil revenues, and domestic and foreign investments resulted in the rapid growth of the middle class in Tehran and other large cities throughout the country. Young people and those in the early stages of their careers began focusing on attaining higher levels of education and training to meet the demands brought on by the economic changes in the country. The inability of Iran's academic institutions to meet the unexpected demand for higher education and the lack of courses and training on the most advanced industrial methods and technologies prompted many young people to seek education outside of Iran.<sup>6</sup> In the meantime, realizing that a small investment in education could easily translate to significant future economic value for the country, the Iranian government readily supported foreign education by providing financial support for many of these students- most of whom hailed from the growing middle class.

During this period, American universities offered some of the best programs in engineering and other technical fields and were anxious to attract students from foreign countries. Iranian students, most of whom had learned English as a second language in Iran, were highly desirable as new students in United States colleges and universities. By the mid-1970s, nearly half of all Iranian students who studied abroad did so in the United States. By 1975, the Institute of International Education's annual foreign student census figures listed Iranian students as the largest group of foreign students in the United States (9 percent).<sup>7</sup> During the next three years alone, the United States saw a near-doubling of the number of Iranian students, from 7,795 in 1975 and 13,928 in 1976, to 25,086 by 1977.

In the meantime, increased foreign investment and liberal foreign exchange rules enabled many Iranians, many of them friends and family members of Iranian students, to travel abroad freely. Consequently, the number of Iranian visitors to the United States also increased considerably, from 35,088 in 1975 to 98,018 in 1977. Altogether, between 1970 and 1977, a total of 316,665 non-immigrant visitors and 57,202 students from Iran entered the United States. By 1979, 51,310 Iranian students were studying in the United States.<sup>8</sup> These visitors and students unintentionally became the basis for the cultural, economic and social networks that would enable large-scale immigration in the years that followed.<sup>9,10</sup> In relation, the number of Iranians entering the United States as immigrants increased moderately during the same time period totaling 25,960 immigrants, of whom 6,040 were naturalized.<sup>11</sup>

It should be noted that most of the non-immigrant visitors and students who were in the United States fully intended to return to Iran once their education or visit had been completed. However, the

---

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>6</sup> Hakimzadeh, Shirin (2006). "Iran: A Vast Diaspora Abroad and Millions of Refugees at Home." Migration Policy Institute; available online at <http://www.migrationinformation.org/feature/display.cfm?ID=424>

<sup>7</sup> Bozorgmehr and Sabagh, 10.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8

<sup>9</sup> Ali Modarres, "Settlement Patterns of Iranians in the United States," *Iranian Studies* 31, no. 1 (January 1, 1998): 48, doi:10.2307/4311117.

<sup>10</sup> Bozorgmehr, Mehdi, "Diaspora," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, Vol. VII, Fasc. 4, pp. 370-387; available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/diaspora>.

<sup>11</sup> Analysis of Bozorgmehr and Sabagh, 8

Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the events that followed effectively curtailed their ability to do so. Their continued stay and the second wave of immigration that occurred following 1979 is now considered the first “brain drain” from Iran.<sup>12</sup>

## THE SECOND WAVE: 1979 - 2001

The second wave of Iranian immigration to the United States began shortly before the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and remained relatively unchanged until 2001.<sup>13</sup>

During the 1970s, due to the increasing restrictions on citizens’ political participation, many Iranians had become disillusioned with the rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Starting in late 1978, street protests led to increasing demands for a change of government, culminating in the 1979 revolution and establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The revolution and the events that followed, including the establishment of an Islamic government following Sharia law and the eight year war between Iran and Iraq, served as catalysts for a mass exodus of much of Iran’s established middle class.<sup>14</sup> By 1988, the World Refugee Survey reported Iran to be tenth among countries with the highest source of refugees.<sup>15</sup>

Iranians who immigrated to the United States after the revolution were different from those who had done so in the preceding 25 years. The new immigrants were no longer principally individual students and professionals, but middle and upper class families, most of whom were political refugees and exiles.<sup>16</sup> They were diverse in their religious, political, and ethnic background and their reasons for leaving Iran varied. They included families associated with the previous regime as members of the government, military, and owners of large businesses.<sup>17</sup> This second wave also included a disproportionately high number of ethnic and religious minorities such as Sunni Muslims, Christians, Jews, Baha’is, and Zoroastrians, all of whom left in fear of religious persecution. The new immigrants also included political dissidents, as well as displaced cultural workers such as writers, journalists, artists, and musicians. During this revolutionary period, about 57 percent of the immigrants to the U.S. from Iran were men.<sup>18</sup>

The new Iranian immigrants were also more economically diverse than their professional and university student predecessors. Although Bozorgmehr and Sabagh (1998) found that some of these new arrivals came from lower educational and occupational backgrounds, when compared to other refugee groups in the United States (except for Cuban and Vietnamese immigrants), the overall socioeconomic background of these immigrants was quite high.

Most of those who travelled to the United States immediately following the Iranian revolution sought ways to become permanent residents. These included Iranians who had saved foreign funds in anticipation of an emergency as well as those who had made a hasty exit with nothing more than a suitcase. Almost all came to the United States with the hope of rebuilding their lives. Those who were political refugees (i.e. held high positions under the Shah) initially expected no more than a sojourn in the United States, believing that political conditions in Iran would soon change and they would be able to return home. Eventually, they realized that the situation in Iran would not revert to its previous state, and they gradually began to live as permanent immigrants in the United States.

A methodical survey of Iranians in Los Angeles by Bozorgmehr revealed that Iranians who arrived prior to the Iranian revolution of 1979 (57 percent) classified themselves as immigrants, while

---

<sup>12</sup> Ansari, “Iranian Immigrants,” 1076.

<sup>13</sup> Analysis of Bozorgmehr and Bakalish, “Backlash 9/11”.

<sup>14</sup> Hakimzadeh, “Iran: A Vast Diaspora”

<sup>15</sup> Bozorgmehr, Mehdi, “Diaspora,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, Vol. VII, Fasc. 4, pp. 370-387; available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/diaspora>.

<sup>16</sup> Bozorgmehr, 1998, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Hakimzadeh, “Iran: A Vast Diaspora”

<sup>18</sup> Mobasher, “Iranians and Iranian Americans, 1940–Present,” in *Immigrants in American History: Arrival, Adaptation, and Integration.*, 2013, 1000,



those who arrived after the revolution classified themselves as exiles or political refugees (43 percent). Due to the considerable number of Iranians present in the United States prior to the Iranian revolution, Iranian Americans today as a whole should not be considered primarily as refugees or exiles. There were, however, differences between the settlement patterns and characteristics of Iranians who settled in the United States before and after the revolution. Numerically, the largest influx of Iranians who came to the United States took place just after the revolutionary period, 1979-1982. The post-revolutionary immigrants included a higher proportion of religion minorities and were much more evenly distributed in terms of age and gender distribution than the Iranians that immigrated to the United States prior to 1979. In addition, post-revolutionary immigrants, of who most were exiles, had somewhat lower socioeconomic occupational status than their pre-revolutionary cohorts. This may have been not only due to their origins, but also due to their forced downward mobility after leaving Iran as exiles or refugees.<sup>19</sup>

The immigration and naturalization trend for Iranians, however, was significantly impacted by the hostage crisis in 1980 and the resulting extreme political tension between the governments of Iran and the United States. In response to the hostage crisis, the United States government revoked the visas of all Iranian non-immigrant visitors and suspended all new visas to Iranian citizens. A number of Iranians were deported from the United States and those who were immigrants were required to report to their local Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) office for extensive interviews.<sup>20</sup> During this period, 56,700 Iranian students reported to the INS and almost 7,000 were found to be in violation of their visas, of whom a number were deported, while most applied for political asylum, fearing that return to Iran would result in their persecution.<sup>21</sup> The discrimination and difficulties that Iranians experienced throughout this time increased their motivation to blend into and comport themselves as productive members of United States.

Following the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in September 1980, an exodus of young men eligible for military service and middle class professionals ensued in Iran, and is reflected in the INS records depicting the relatively high number of men entering the United States.<sup>22</sup> Between 1981 and 1990, 116,172 Iranians immigrated to the United States.<sup>23</sup> Young men who were at risk of being drafted to fight in the Iran-Iraq War (1980 – 1988) became the beneficiaries of United States political asylum laws.<sup>24</sup> Between October 1981 and February 1985, more Iranians were granted asylum — 11,055 in total — than any other nationality. Thousands of other Iranians, however, remained in the United States illegally, working odd jobs, living with relatives and family, and making every effort to pass detection by INS agents and deportation back to Iran.

The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), passed in 1986, allowed thousands of Iranians who had been living illegally in the country to become legal permanent residents. This act not only increased the number of Iranians with permanent residency status, but the Act's family-sponsored preference category resulted in a surge in immigration by relatives of Iranians already in the United States.

The adjustment of status for Iranians under IRCA precipitated naturalization to U.S. citizenship of a large number of Iranians who were then able to sponsor their families. The predominantly male Iranian immigrant population was joined by their wives and children. Consequently, in 1992, for the first time in the history of Iranian immigration to the U.S., the number of Iranian women admitted as

---

<sup>19</sup> Georges Sabagh and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, "Are the Characteristics of Exiles Different from Immigrants? The Case of Iranians in Los Angeles," *Institute for Social Science Research*, May 1, 1986.

<sup>20</sup> Sabagh and Bozorgmehr, "Survey Research among Middle Eastern Immigrants in the United States: Iranians in Los Angeles," *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 23 (1987): 77-84.

<sup>21</sup> Mobasher, "Iranians and Iranian Americans, 1940–Present," 1002.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 1000.

<sup>23</sup> U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Fiscal Year 2001 Statistical Yearbook, Immigration by Region and Selected Country of Last Residence Table, pages 6 – 8.

<sup>24</sup> Ansari, "Iranian Immigrants," 1077.

immigrants to the U.S. surpassed the number of men.<sup>25</sup> From 1985 to 1989 46,418 Iranian men and 37,071 women were admitted to the United States, compared to 41,977 men and 42,041 women who were admitted from 1990-1994.<sup>26</sup> The number of older Iranian immigrants also greatly increased during this time.<sup>27</sup>

## THE THIRD WAVE: 2001 - PRESENT

The catastrophic terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 significantly impacted Iranian immigration to the United States.

Even though Iranians did not have a part in the terrorist attacks on the United States, in his State of the Union address in January 2002, President George Bush labeled Iran, Iraq, and Korea as part of the “axis of evil” countries that were sponsoring terrorism and seeking weapons of mass destruction. Soon thereafter, the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Reform Act of 2002 was created and signed into law by President Bush in 2002.<sup>28</sup> Section 306 of the law forbade the issuance of nonimmigrant visas to any alien who was from a country considered a “state sponsor of terrorism” by the U.S. Department of State, unless the Secretary of State decided that the alien in question posed no danger to U.S. national security.<sup>29</sup>

In September 2002, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) instituted a policy known as the Domestic Call in Registration Program, also known as NSEERS. Under this program, non-immigrant male nationals from twenty-five countries, including Iran, were required to report to their local INS office and be fingerprinted, questioned, and photographed.<sup>30</sup> The events which followed the December 16<sup>th</sup> registration program were particularly disturbing to Iranian Americans. Due to procedural infractions, hundreds of male Iranians, including those who were waiting for the adjudication of their legal claims to become permanent residents, were arrested, detained, and harshly treated. Over 1,000 Iranians were arrested and detained by INS and many others were deported because of visa infractions. In response to the detention of Iranians, large protests took place in Los Angeles.<sup>31</sup>

The number of immigrant and refugee visas that were issued to Iranians during this time decreased significantly, from 13,887 Iranian immigrants and 2,971 refugees admitted to the United States in 2002 to 7,251 immigrants and 1,878 refugees in 2003. As noted in the figure on the following page, it would take a couple of years before the numbers rebounded again.

The Enhanced Border Security and Visa Reform Act, NSEERS, and the backlash that occurred against Iranians as a result prompted the community to re-evaluate its standing in the United States and what it needed to do to protect its individual and communal rights. Numerous Iranian American organizations were formed in the aftermath of 9/11 focused primarily on addressing the domestic interests of and protecting the rights of Iranian Americans. Communities gathered to protest against acts of discrimination as well as the negative image that the media had built of the community. There was a marked interest and active participation in civic activities, including identifying and electing Iranian Americans or those who were supportive of the community to elected office. The Iranian American

---

<sup>25</sup> Mohsen M. Mobasher, *Iranians in Texas: Migration, Politics, and Ethnic Identity* (University of Texas Press, 2012), 43.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 1001

<sup>27</sup> Mobasher, *Iranians in Texas*, University of Texas Press (2012), 2.

<sup>28</sup> F. Sensenbrenner, “H.R.3525 - 107th Congress (2001-2002): Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002,” legislation, May 14, 2002, <http://beta.congress.gov/bill/107th-congress/house-bill/3525>.

<sup>29</sup> *H.R.3525 Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002*, n.d.,

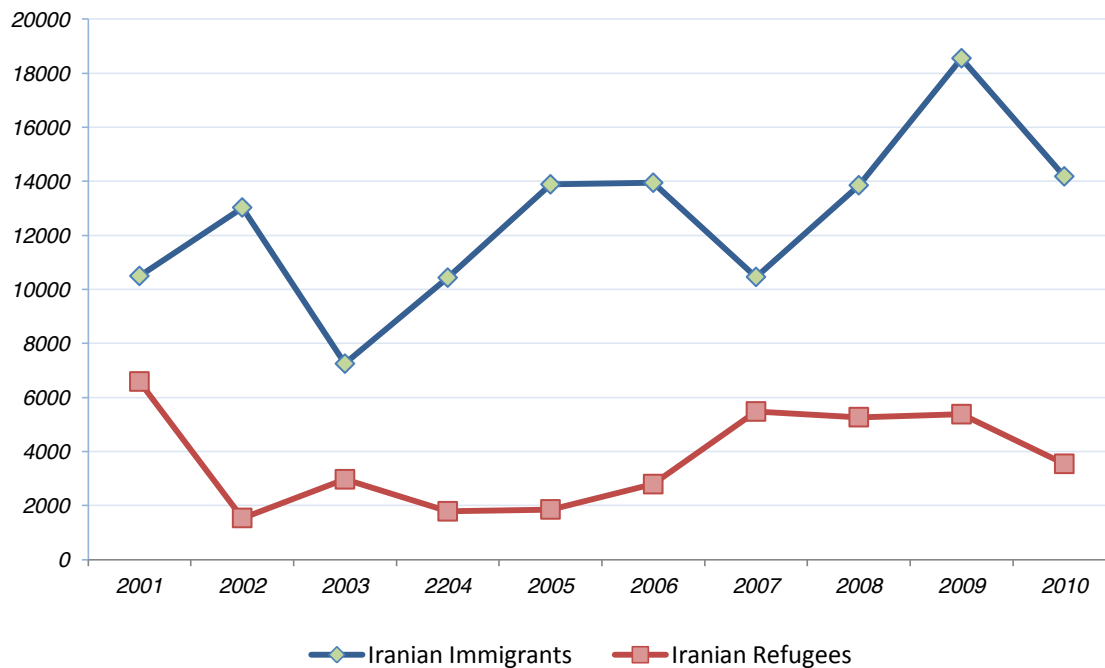
<sup>30</sup> IAPAC. “INS Special Registration Program Shifts Gears – IAPAC Brief.” July 2, 2003. Accessed November 6, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Anny P. Bakalian and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, *Backlash 9/11: Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans Respond* (University of California Press, 2009), 293.

Political Action Committee (IAPAC) was established in 2003 to promote the election of candidates that support the advancement of Iranian American issues.<sup>32</sup>

Iranian Americans also began to take a more active role in the politics of Iran. The alleged irregularities of the 2009 presidential election in Iran, in which Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was reelected to a second term, triggered massive protests both in Iran and throughout the world. These protests, widely known as the “Green Movement,” were brutally suppressed by the Iranian police and military. The election results and the treatment of their fellow countrymen were a catalyst for increased political action among the community. As noted in Figure 2, there was a 25 percent decrease in the number of immigrant visas issued in 2010 (from 18,552 in 2009 to 14,182 in 2010) and 30 percent drop in the number of Iranian refugees admitted to the United States (from 5,381 in 2009 to 3,543 in 2010). The reason for this change is unclear, though most researchers contribute it to challenges that Iranians faced in traveling abroad for visas following the events in Iran.<sup>33</sup>

**Figure 2 – Iranian American Immigrant and Refugee Admission (2001 – 2010)**



Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1986-2005* – U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, *Annual Reports, 1960 -1977 and Statistical Yearbook, 1978 - 1986*

## ASSIMILATION: PATTERNS AND CHALLENGES

When discussing immigrant groups, the term “first generation” can refer to both those who have emigrated from another country and to their children who arrived before age thirteen. Within the context of this report, however, first-generation Iranian Americans refers to those individuals who immigrated to the United States from Iran. Their children are referred to as second-generation Iranian Americans.

<sup>32</sup> Mehdi Bozorgmehr, “Iran,” in *The New Americans: A Guide to Immigration Since 1965*, First (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 469–78.

<sup>33</sup> U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1986-2005* – U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, *Annual Reports, 1960 -1977 and Statistical Yearbook, 1978 - 1986*

Richard Alba and Victor Nee define assimilation as “the decline, and at its endpoint, the disappearance of an ethnic/racial distinction and the cultural and social differences that express it.”<sup>34</sup> Within this definition, assimilation is not simply the substitution of one cultural expression for another, but the ability of minority ethnic cultures to absorb or incorporate elements of the dominant culture to create a hybrid cultural mix. This definition avoids assimilation’s past normative or ideological applications and incorporates the belief that the host country’s culture also assimilates and changes as the result of the immigrant experience.

Assimilation is a process that occurs gradually, beginning from the moment an immigrant sets foot into the country. The process of assimilation is impacted by daily interactions and experiences. Though individuals assimilate into a new culture, society, and economy at different paces, the assimilation process of an entire group into a new country occurs over decades and generations. The Iranian American assimilation process is no different in this regard.

Thirty-five years after the largest wave of Iranian immigration to the United States, there continues to be significant diversity among individual Iranian Americans and their assimilation into the overall population of the United States. There are many who have fully absorbed American culture — assuming westernized names, speaking only English, and embracing American ways in every aspect of their lives. At the other extreme are those who have steadfastly maintained their Iranian heritage and emphatically refuse to accept any part of the new culture in which they live. The majority of Iranian Americans, however, fall somewhere between these two extremes, combining the Iranian and American cultures and attempting to live a life that honors both cultures, if not equally, at least effectively.

A systematic measurement of the Iranian American assimilation process is difficult. There is limited data available about most recently established national ethnic groups. Though there have been few surveys that have collected accurate and up-to-date information about the Iranian American community, most of the information continues to be gleaned from a scientific poll conducted in 2005-2006 in California, from the Census Bureau’s every-decade survey of the population and more recent American Community Surveys, as well as the national surveys of Iranian Americans commissioned by the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA). The latter, begun in 2008, have been conducted annually with the exception of 2010. As a result, much of the information available on the Iranian American community is based on approximations and conclusions drawn from these sources.

## SELF-IDENTIFICATION

There are a number of factors that have influenced Iranian Americans’ sense of identity and their overall assimilation into the culture of the United States. The relationship between the United States and Iran and the effects of this relationship on how Iranian Americans are perceived has been one of the main challenges faced by the Iranian American community. International events unrelated to United States–Iran relations have also impacted perceptions of the community.<sup>35</sup>

As PAAIA’s 2008 National Public Opinion Survey of American Perception of Iranian Americans revealed, “American perceptions of Iran, Iranians and Iranian Americans are mostly formed by media reports on Iran that are for the most part focused on the political situation there and the state of relations between the two countries.” However, most Americans surveyed stated that they believed Iranian Americans generally share the same values as Americans as a whole, while a near-equal number also believed that the current government of Iran does not represent the values and views of a majority of

---

<sup>34</sup> Alba, Richard and Nee, Victor. “Rethinking Assimilation For a New Era of Immigration.” *International Migration Review* 31 (4): 863.

<sup>35</sup> Mobasher, *Iranians in Texas*.

Iranian Americans.<sup>36</sup> Thus, while United States–Iran relations impact the perceptions that Americans as a whole have of this community, they do not completely define American perceptions.

There is no question, however, that escalating hostilities between the United States and Iran have adversely affected both first- and second-generation Iranian Americans. For the former, the deterioration of relations between the two governments has been a significant factor in their assimilation process. The initial backlash against Iranian Americans began following the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Until then, the United States and Iran had enjoyed strong and collaborative relations. The revolution, however, began a period of accelerated decline in United States–Iran relations. With the 1979 hostage crisis, in which 52 Americans were seized and held for 444 days, the United States and Iranian governments changed from being allies to becoming *de facto* adversaries. Students and families who had studied, worked, and lived freely and comfortably in the United States were suddenly faced with acts of discrimination and overzealous investigation by the United States government. Students were required to register with the INS, have a valid visa, and provide proof of being enrolled in school full-time. Those who did not have legal status were scheduled for deportation.<sup>37</sup> Though a number of Iranian students sued the United States government to have the decree revoked, claiming they were being unfairly targeted, 20 students were deported and 823 voluntarily agreed to leave the United States during that time.<sup>38</sup> This change in the treatment of Iranian Americans was one of the first significant challenges that the community encountered, effectively interrupting an otherwise steady and seamless path to assimilation.

During this period, Iranian Americans were also the recipients of a backlash of prejudice, discrimination, and sometimes violence from individuals displacing their anger at the actions of the Iranian government. Verbal and physical attacks on Iranian American students on college campuses, boycotts of Iranian businesses, and even incidents of arson occurred.<sup>39</sup> A number of colleges and universities, particularly in the South, instituted discriminatory policies against Iranian students.<sup>40</sup> For example, the Mississippi legislature passed a bill which doubled the tuition rate of all Iranians attending public universities in the state.<sup>41</sup> Iranians were also often portrayed negatively in the media. As a result, according to former Iranian Prime Minister Shahpour Bakhtiar, “the process of assimilation was increasingly more difficult during those times. Iranians were often lumped together by the press and public.”<sup>42</sup> These experiences prompted many Iranian Americans to distance themselves from their heritage. Many began referring to their origin as “Persian” rather than “Iranian.” Others changed their last names, Americanizing them to conceal their heritage. Many banded together in mutual support and began avoiding the general American public to decrease possible incidents of abuse and discrimination. According to Bakhtiar, “many Iranians shopped at night and otherwise avoided people to reduce the threat of physical attack.”

United States–Iran relations, as well as reports of Iranian involvement in various international incidents, also influenced the identity of second-generation Iranian Americans. In 2009, Golnaz Komaie published a doctoral dissertation, entitled “The Persian Veil,” in which she conducted 51 interviews of generation 1.5 (those who came to the United States under the age of 13) and the second generation (those born in the United States to at least one immigrant parent) of Iranian Americans in southern California. She found a correlation between the troubled relations of the two nations and self-identification by Iranian

---

<sup>36</sup> “Public Opinion Survey of American Perception of Iranian Americans.” Commissioned by the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA) and conducted by Zogby International. December 2008. Available online at <http://www.paaia.org/CMS/Data/Sites/1/PDFs/finalreport-surveyofamericanperceptions.pdf>. Citation on page 2.

<sup>37</sup> Bozorgmehr, “Iran,” 475.

<sup>38</sup> McCann, Joseph T. *Terrorism on American Soil: A Concise History of Plots and Perpetrators from the Famous to the Forgotten*. Boulder, Sentient Publications, 2006, 141.

<sup>39</sup> Mills, Gregory J., “Beyond the Backlash: Muslim and Middle Eastern Immigrants’ Experiences in America, Ten Years Post-9/11” (2012). *Graduate School Theses and Dissertations*.

<sup>40</sup> “The Hostage Crisis and Integration of Iranians in the United States.” *Immigrants in American History: Arrival, Adaptation, and Integration*. Ed. Elliott Robert Barkan. Vol. 3. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2013. 1002. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Web. 18 May 2013.

<sup>41</sup> E.R. Barkan, *Immigrants in American History: Arrival, Adaptation, and Integration* (ABC-CLIO, 2012), 1002,

<sup>42</sup> Bozorgmehr and Douglas, “Success(ion),” 7-8.

Americans. Her findings indicated that the second generation was more likely to self-identify as “Persian” and to downplay their ties to Iran after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City, even though none of the perpetrators of the attacks were of Iranian origin.

There has, however, been a definite change in how Iranian Americans have self-identified over the past decade. During this time, the percentage of Iranian Americans born in the United States has increased steadily. In 1990, only 20 percent of Iranian Americans were native born; by 2000, however, the percentage had increased to 32 percent, and 35 percent by 2010. In a survey conducted nationally, approximately half of the 1.5 and second generations identified themselves as Iranian American, one-third as Iranian, and 10 percent as American. As expected, in areas where there was a higher concentration of Iranian Americans, such as California, the proportion of those identifying themselves as Iranian was higher.

In another survey, conducted in New Jersey in 2005, Iranian Americans were asked: “How do you think of yourself?” A large majority (70 percent) said that they were Iranian American, while 10 percent and 20 percent, respectively, said they considered themselves American and either Iranian or Persian.<sup>43</sup> This was a significant change from a similar survey conducted in 1988, when only 30 percent of those surveyed identified themselves as Iranian American. In the 2005 survey, most respondents said that their attitudes toward their Iranian ancestry began to change around the age of 13, primarily because of their association with other Iranian children as friends or going to Persian classes. Studies have suggested that college has also been an important time for many Iranian Americans as they rediscover their heritage.

Generally speaking, Iranian Americans’ self-identity is symbolic in nature and related to cultural observances, customs, and recreational activities. The first generation is more reluctant to assimilate completely because of their deep attachments to, and preoccupation with, events in the homeland. The second generation sees themselves more American, and lack the attachment to the Iranian homeland that their parents hold. They are more likely to be politically and socially engaged with their American side,<sup>44</sup> and although they are interested in visiting Iran, they would not consider living there.<sup>45</sup> Iranians are now at a point in their immigrant journey where they selectively choose elements of their Iranian and American identities, developing a unique “diasporic” identity that is quite different from native Iranians.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Iranians stay connected to one another despite their differences through strong memories and attachments to their homeland<sup>47</sup>.

Iranians pick and choose elements of their home culture to forge a chosen identity abroad that is not necessarily directly related to their homeland as constituted today. This diasporic identity arose as a result of the large, heterogeneous group of Iranians who forcibly left Iran *en masse* after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The Iranian diasporic community may view its national, American identity as being related to political and civic, and national responsibilities, while at the same time incorporating elements of Iranian cultural and ethnic practices, and a strong sense of family ties, especially within the private domain.<sup>48</sup>

## CULTURAL OBSERVANCES

Related to self-identification, and arguably an important component of it, are cultural observances. Iranian Americans have retained a wide variety of traditional Iranian celebrations and customs as part of their “Iranianess.” In a survey published in the article “Iranian American Identity”

---

<sup>43</sup> Ansari, “Iranian Immigrants,” 1093

<sup>44</sup> Bozorgmehr, “Iran,” 477.

<sup>45</sup> Nilou Mostofi, “Who We Are: The Perplexity of Iranian-American Identity,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (October 1, 2003): 686, doi:10.2307/4120728.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 682.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 687.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 682.

(*Iran Times*), Iranian Americans were asked: “What qualities are important in the Iranian part of your identity?” Most cited their family, language, Nowruz (Persian New Year), Persian food, hospitality, politeness, courtesy, and respect for elders. The latter four are staples of Iranian values.

Prior to the large-scale immigration triggered by the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Iranian Americans had few cultural institutions. However, over the past thirty years, this has changed dramatically. Today, there are over a hundred Iranian American cultural, regional, religious, and professional organizations and foundations throughout the United States.<sup>49</sup> These include cultural centers for art and performance, Persian schools, chapters of national organizations, and organizations dedicated to academic and other pursuits. These organizations offer a wide variety of activities and programs, ranging from traditional festivals, Iranian musical performances, and Persian language lessons, to making and promoting traditional Iranian food.

Cultural centers were the earliest community-based organizations for Iranian Americans. It would not be an exaggeration to assume that there is at least one, if not more than one, Iranian American cultural organization in every state in the United States – including those with smaller concentrations of Iranian Americans. They exist in almost every major American city and include both local organizations and chapters of national organizations. The primary aim of these groups is to perform and promote activities through which Iranian Americans can remain connected to their heritage but also educate those not of Iranian descent about Iranian culture.

Since ancient times, Iranians have celebrated three national festivals: Nowruz, Mehregan, and Sadeh. The largest, and perhaps most important, is Nowruz, the Persian New Year. Nowruz, which is more than 2,000 years old and is celebrated by more than 300 million people around the world falls on the first day of the spring equinox (usually March 21<sup>st</sup>), and the celebration traditionally lasts more than 13 days. The celebration includes the arrangement of the *sofreh haftsin*, a table decorated with flowers and seven items that begin with the letter “s” in Persian, symbolizing different wishes for the New Year, such as health and patience. Nowruz is accompanied by the holiday *Charshanbeh Souri*, celebrated before the New Year, during which individuals jump over a bonfire to rid themselves of the past year’s sickness and problems. *Sizdahbedar* is celebrated 13 days after the New Year by spending the day at a picnic outdoors with one’s family. It is considered good luck and a blessing to leave the house with one’s family on that day.

Beginning in the 1980s, Nowruz has been increasingly celebrated in public settings such as museums and city halls with many non-Iranians, including prominent public figures, in attendance. In recent years, Nowruz celebrations have been held, among other places, at the Smithsonian Institution, the residence of New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, on Capitol Hill, and at the White House. In 2009, President Obama released a message to the people of Iran, declaring Iranians a “great civilization” and stating: “Here in the United States, our own communities have been enhanced by the contributions of Iranian Americans.” In 2010, both chambers of the United States Congress passed resolutions which recognized the cultural and historical significance of Nowruz, expressed appreciation to Iranian Americans for their contributions to society and wished Iranian Americans and the people of Iran a prosperous new year. The Nowruz resolutions was part of PAAIA’s broader efforts to foster greater understanding of Iranian culture and heritage as well as to project an accurate and positive image of the Iranian American community on Capitol Hill.

Like other ethnic groups, Iranian Americans are enthusiastic and willing to celebrate their culture with non-Iranians. Since 2004, for example, an annual Persian parade has been held in New York City, along fifteen blocks of Madison Avenue. Iranian Americans of all backgrounds participate, walking or riding on floats and wearing costumes from their ancestral home. This parade is currently one of the

---

<sup>49</sup> Ansari, “Iranian Immigrants,” 1093.

largest publicly visible Iranian American ceremonies and plays an important role in bolstering a sense of cultural pride, particularly among members of the second generation.<sup>50</sup>

Another important way Iranian Americans express their cultural heritage is through the use of mass media. In Los Angeles, over the last thirty-five years, a veritable Iranian cultural industry has developed and matured as the professional artists, singers, musicians, filmmakers, and poets who left Iran due to restrictions on their artistic products made a new home for themselves in the U.S. Currently, there are five radio and thirty television stations which broadcast in Persian by satellite to all parts of the world, including Iran. This cultural programming helps Iranian Americans remain in contact with their culture and also provides additional cultural programming for many Iranians inside Iran. In areas where they are present in large numbers, Iranian Americans also publish numerous local and national publications that contain commercial, cultural, and occasionally, political information,

Iranian music is rich and diverse. In the aftermath<sup>12</sup> of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, however, the Iranian government banned music for a period of time, considering it reflective of Western moral decay. To this day, only certain forms of music are permitted in Iran. As a result, many Iranian singers, musicians, and performers were forced to leave the country and settle in the United States, where they have contributed to a rich cultural industry in Iranian music and drama. Over the past few years, with the increasing use of the internet, a number of Internet-based Iranian radio stations have been launched that have become a popular venue for listening to both old and recent musical performances. These stations target both the younger generation of Iranian Americans (e.g., Radio Javan) and the more traditional, first-generation Iranians (e.g., Radio Darvish). Traditional Persian music has always played an important role in fostering a sense of ethnic identity among Iranian Americans. Today, there are several centers in the United States dedicated to its performance.

Hand in hand with music, poetry has also long occupied a very important position in Iranian culture. In the United States, it has been an important means by which Iranian Americans remain connected to their heritage. One of the most popular activities at cultural centers through the country is the *Shab-I-Shehr* (poetry reading night), where interested individuals gather to read and discuss the poetry of Iranian poetic masters. Interestingly enough, the works of Iranian poets, such as Hafez and Rumi, known for the depth of their poetic message, have become well-known to the general United States population, adding to the pride that the Iranian American community feels towards its ancient heritage.

Finally, food is another important means of cultural preservation in the Iranian American community. Dishes like *chelo kabab*, *fesenjan*, and *khoresh-t ghormeh sabzi*, remain staples for many, particularly for the first generation. Iranian food has also become popular among non-Iranian Americans, an indicator of ethnic influence on mainstream American culture. Iranian grocery stores have proliferated, particularly in Los Angeles, and the number of Iranian restaurants and fast-food vendors in the United States has doubled over the past ten years.

## ETHNIC DIVERSITY

Iranian American immigrants are, in large part, a reflection of the ethnic diversity that exists in Iran. The people of Iran have many religious and ethnic minorities. Because members of some of these groups fled Iran after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, there is a disproportionately high number of Iranian ethnic minorities in the United States.<sup>51</sup> These include Armenians, who are Orthodox Christians, Assyrians, who are also Christian, Kurds, who are Sunni, and Turkish-speaking Iranians of Azeri origin.

---

<sup>50</sup> "Welcome to the Annual Persian Parade," *New York Persian Parade*, n.d.

<sup>51</sup> Sabagh and Bozorgmehr, "Are the Characteristics of Exiles Different from Immigrants?"



Many of these sub-ethnic groups identify as Iranians but also strongly identify with their sub-ethnicity, and assimilate more slowly than their Iranian majority counterparts.<sup>52</sup>

## BENCHMARKS OF ASSIMILATION

The second generation of Iranian American has retained a sense of being Iranian in part by speaking Farsi, in addition to celebrating traditions and customs and passing these to their children. They have also picked up American customs and values and incorporated them into their day-to-day lives. Many second generation Iranian Americans are active “soccer moms and dads” during the weekends, celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas, and ensure that their children are fully involved in school events and activities. In the meantime, many insist on serving Persian food at home, celebrating Persian holidays, and enrolling their children in Persian language classes on the weekends. Their Iranian and American identities are integrated, and both are core components of who they are.

Iranian American members of the 1.5 generation, those who were adolescents when they immigrated, were both too young to have lived independently in Iran and, upon arriving in the United States, too old to feel completely American. Like members of other immigrant groups, they have often experienced a feeling of “dual marginality,” of not completely belonging to either their country of origin or their adopted land. For many of these people, there has been a continued struggle as they attempt to define their identity within the confines of both cultures. Ultimately, however, the fact that many Iranians have U.S.-born children who feel culturally more Americans, or intermarry, causes most Iranians to choose to accept a hyphenated (Iranian-American) identity.

Four benchmarks are generally used traditionally to measure assimilation: language proficiency, intermarriage, spatial concentration, and socio-economic status. Using these criteria, one can determine with a significant degree of confidence that the Iranian American community has made significant strides in successfully assimilating to a new culture and way of living.

### LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

As the assimilation process has taken place over the generations, there has been a noticeable change in what, to many Iranian Americans, constitutes being “Iranian.” To the first generation, the use of the Persian language was and continues to be central to their identity.<sup>53</sup> Generally, knowledge of the mother tongue rapidly declines with each generation among United States immigrant groups: the first generation principally speaks their native language, the second generation is fluent in both their parents’ native language and English, and the third generation typically speaks only English, while maintaining knowledge of some isolated words and phrases from their ancestral tongue. Iranian Americans have followed this pattern. One respondent from the 2005 New Jersey study previously cited said: “For us, the Persian language, while very important, does not occupy the same place as it does for our parents.”<sup>54</sup>

Although first-generation Iranian Americans speak mostly Persian at home, due to their high levels of education prior to immigration, they have also been far more proficient in English than first-generation immigrants from many other groups. Whereas it is typical for most members of the initial generation to have limited English proficiency, in the *American Community Survey 2009 - 2011*, taken from the United States Census Bureau, 57 percent of foreign-born Iranians in the United States stated they

<sup>52</sup> Mehdi Bozorgmehr, “Internal Ethnicity: Iranians in Los Angeles,” *Sociological Perspectives* 40, no. 3 (January 1, 1997): 387–408, doi:10.2307/1389449.

<sup>53</sup> Ansari, “Iranian Immigrants,” 1087.

<sup>54</sup> Ansari, “Iranian Immigrants,” 1087.

spoke English “very well.”<sup>55</sup> For being a relatively new group of immigrants from a non-English-speaking country, this is a remarkably high figure. As noted by Mehdi Bozorgmehr, this unusually high level of English proficiency is partly due to the fact that many were educated in the United States. According to the same survey, the naturalization rate of first-generation Iranian Americans was an exceptional 71 percent, significantly higher than the figure for foreign-born Americans as a whole.

## INTERMARRIAGE

An additional measure of how well an immigrant group assimilates into the host society is the extent to which its members intermarry with and have friends and acquaintances among the general population. In these respects, Iranian Americans appear to have integrated quite well. According to a survey commissioned by PAAIA in 2008, only 21 percent of Iranian Americans surveyed reported interacting mostly with other Iranian Americans outside of their workplace, demonstrating that most have successfully integrated into United States society.<sup>56</sup>

Intermarriage rate is very high among Iranian Americans. It has been estimated that nearly 50 percent of Iranian Americans who married between 1995 and 2007 married non-Iranian Americans.<sup>57</sup> Research has indicated that Iranian Americans who are Muslim are more open to intermarry than those who are members of religious or ethnic minorities, <sup>14</sup> as Jews and Armenians.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, women are less likely to intermarry than men, likely because as a group, they are more likely to adhere to traditional Iranian values, including marriages that are approved by their families and within Iranian cultural norms. Some studies have revealed a relatively high level of intermarriage among Iranian men.<sup>59</sup>

## SPATIAL CONCENTRATION

Spatial concentration has also often been an important indicator of an immigrant community’s assimilation process. The spatial-residential model essentially states that increasing socioeconomic attainment, longer residence in the United States, and higher generational status (second generation is “higher” than first, third is higher than second, etc.) leads to decreasing spatial concentration for an ethnic group. Most newly arrived immigrants, including most Iranian immigrants, are concentrated in a handful of states and metropolitan areas.

It is interesting to note that, while Iranian Americans have achieved high socioeconomic levels, they have not yet residentially integrated with the majority population in large numbers. However, the pattern of settlement of Iranians has not resulted in a geographically segregated ethnic neighborhood, defined by a dense area in which local ethnic businesses cater mostly to other co-ethnics, and co-ethnics live close together in residentially segregated areas (such as for example, Chinatown). Although Iranians have a preference for living in particular states and regions due to pre-existing family and business ties, their geographic patterns have not resulted in one central community in any particular metropolitan area. This is because immigrant groups with high levels of income and high socioeconomic status, such as Iranians, do not rely on co-ethnic ties as much as immigrants with low income.<sup>60</sup> The 2005-2007 American Community Survey found that 37 percent of Iranian Americans lived in California, with Los Angeles being home to the largest community in that state. There are also large concentrations of Iranian Americans in New York, Texas, Maryland, Virginia, Georgia, Florida, and Washington, D.C. This spatial concentration may be due to the relatively short time period during which Iranian Americans have existed

<sup>55</sup> U.S. Census Bureau; (08 April 2014

<sup>56</sup> “Public Opinion Survey of Iranian Americans,” Commissioned by the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA), and conducted by Zogby International, 2008.

<sup>57</sup> Ansari, “Iranian Immigrants,” 1091

<sup>58</sup> Bozorgmehr and Douglas, ‘Success(ion)’, 8.

<sup>59</sup> Shideh Hanassab and Romeria Tidwell, “Intramariage and Intermariage: Young Iranians in Los Angeles,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 22, no. 4 (November 1, 1998): 395–408, doi:10.1016/S0147-1767(98)00015-7.

<sup>60</sup> Alejandro Portes, *Immigrant America: A Portrait*, 2nd ed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

in large numbers, compared to many other immigrant communities, as well as to economic and educational opportunities and the presence of local support networks in these states. For example, places such as Houston, Texas, which have a relatively low per capita cost of living and more non-technical jobs, are now home to an increasing number of Iranian Americans, especially those for whom economic concerns are of paramount importance.

## SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

The fourth benchmark that is traditionally used to measure assimilation is socioeconomic status, defined by educational attainment, occupation, and income. By measuring socioeconomic status, researchers can determine if immigrants eventually catch up to native-born citizens in terms of their professional and employment characteristics and, in turn, the extent to which they contribute to the decline of ethnic boundaries. Moreover, entry into the occupational and economic mainstream also leads to increased social assimilation, as there is increased contact on equal terms across ethnic lines in both the workplace and neighborhood.

Measured by socioeconomic criteria, the Iranian American community began their immigrant journey with exceptional educational attainment, and currently has integrated very well with the majority population. An overview of socioeconomic characteristics of the Iranian American community based on the 2000 United States census, completed by the Iranian Studies Group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 2005, suggests that the educational level of Iranian Americans is well above the national average.<sup>61</sup> The second generation of Iranian Americans is still in the process of completing their education, and it is thus too early to assess their attainment, but the overall trajectory of educational attainment is extremely positive, especially among women and girls.<sup>62</sup> Iranian Americans have an overall extremely high level of educational attainment, above the aggregate level for all native-born and all foreign-born persons in the United States.

In the United States Census Bureau's 2011 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Estimates, fifty-eight percent of Iranian Americans age 25 or over were said to have received at least a B.A.<sup>63</sup> In comparison, the percentage of Americans as a whole (also 25 or over) receiving a B.A. or a higher degree only surpassed thirty percent for the first time in the 2011 census. With more than 27 percent of Iranian Americans over the age of 25 having a graduate degree or above, Iranian Americans are among the most highly-educated ethnic groups in the United States.

Iranian Americans' economic achievements are equally impressive. The MIT study analyzed data from the 2000 census and concluded that the per capita average income for Iranian Americans was 50 percent higher than that of the nation as a whole, while average family income was 38 percent higher. According to Ronald H. Bayer's *Multicultural America: An Encyclopedia of the Newest Americans*, about 50 percent of all working Iranian Americans are in professional and managerial occupations, far surpassing any other group in the United States today.<sup>64</sup>

In the 2013 National Public Opinion Survey of Iranian Americans commissioned by PAAIA, a majority—54 percent—stated that their annual income was \$60,000 or more, a figure similar to previous surveys.<sup>65</sup> According to Census Bureau data for 2011, the last year currently available, only 42 percent of

---

<sup>61</sup> [Iranian Studies Group at MIT, Iranian American Community Survey Results, 2005](#)". Web.mit.edu. Retrieved November 28, 2011.

<sup>62</sup> Mehdi Bozorgmehr and Daniel Douglas, "Success(ion): Second-Generation Iranian Americans.," *Iranian Studies* 44, no. 1 (January 2011): 3–24.

<sup>63</sup> United States Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2011 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, Table S0201; generated by Morad Ghorban; using American FactFinder ; (24 April 2013).

<sup>64</sup> Ansari, "Iranian Immigrants," 1081.

<sup>65</sup> "2013 National Public Opinion Survey of Iranian Americans." Commissioned by the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA), and conducted by George Mason University Center for Social Science Research. Citation on page 23.

Americans as a whole earned at the same rate.<sup>66</sup> The 2009-2011 American Community Survey listed the median household income of Iranian Americans at \$61,463, far above the median income for all foreign-born persons in the United States, \$47,275, and above the household income for native-born persons, \$52,065. In addition, the per-capita income of Iranian Americans in the 2009-2011 American Community Survey is 1.7 times greater than the native-born population.<sup>67</sup> Thirty-two percent of Iranian Americans in the 2013 survey reported a household income of \$100,000 or more, whereas the 2011 Census Bureau figures showed only 21 percent of Americans as a whole earning that much.<sup>68</sup>

## WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

As stated in the beginning of this report, there are many impediments to conducting a thorough analysis of the assimilation process of Iranian Americans within the larger American society. In addition to lack of self-identification among many Iranian Americans on demographic surveys, the Iranian American community is also one of the newer immigrant communities in the United States. It is widely accepted that the immigrant generation changes as it accommodates itself to life in a new society, but that these changes are usually quite limited for individuals who have come to the United States as adults. Thus, it is only with the passage of at least three generations that it is possible to assess the assimilation process of the Iranian American community. Because many of second-generation Iranian Americans are still young, studies on Iranian American assimilation are, therefore, currently limited in their scope.

Given these constraints, this report aims to assess assimilation among Iranian Americans as fairly as possible. What was found is that while Iranian Americans have a high level of English proficiency, a high intermarriage rate, and, as a group, a relatively high socioeconomic status, they are still spatially concentrated in a handful of areas. The report does not aim to make any claims about which of these four benchmarks, traditionally used to measure assimilation, is most important, but to use the benchmarks to describe the evolution of the Iranian American community in these areas. However, though the first three measures point to a steady movement towards assimilation, the latter is a sign that an immigrant community is in the early stages of the assimilation process.

As the first generation slowly gives way to the second generation of Iranian Americans, the assimilation process will further evolve. Many first-generation Iranian American immigrants feel a deep responsibility to ensure that their culture and heritage is celebrated by future generations. It is of particular importance to this generation, many of whose members grew up in Iran and still consider it to be “home,” to ensure that the Iranian culture remains alive and is celebrated fully in the years and decades to come. As a result, many first-generation Iranian Americans have been significant contributors to the founding of a number of local and national organizations that maintain, enrich, and celebrate Iranian culture and presence.

This passion to preserve their culture has paid off. During the last 15 years, the community has undergone a process of “reverse assimilation,” in which younger Iranian Americans have re-embraced their heritage and developed stronger bonds with Iranian American communities throughout the United States. This process has taken many forms, from visiting Iran, taking Persian language classes in college, writing memoirs of their experiences (such as Firoozeh Dumas’s *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America*, among many others), the establishment of Persian music bands, and the creation of websites about Iran and its culture. Reverse assimilation has also included the creation of national organizations aimed at providing a variety of cultural, civic, educational and humanitarian programs for the community (such as PAAIA, Pars Equality Foundation and Iranian Alliances Across Borders),

---

<sup>66</sup> [Table H-9 Race of Head of Household by Median and Mean Income, US Census Bureau](#), retrieved 2013-05-29.

<sup>67</sup> American Community Survey Factfinder

<sup>68</sup> IBID

professional associations (such as the Iranian American Bar Association and the Iranian American Medical Association, to count only two) summer camps, conferences by different Iranian organizations (such as PAAIA, IAAB, and the National Iranian American Council), and participation in Persian parades and celebrations.

The first generation of Iranian Americans is not the only group focused on the evolution of the Iranian American community; the second generation is also keenly interested. Today, many of the community's members are actively involved in civic activities, political campaigns, days of service, and similar programs. The coming of age of the second generation of Iranians in the post-9/11 era has also given them a renewed sense of ethnic solidarity and pride in asserting their civil rights as Iranian Americans and increasing their political and civic engagement in the American democratic process.<sup>69</sup>

According to PAAIA's 2013 National Public Opinion Survey of Iranian Americans, 19 percent stated that they have volunteered for a political candidate or campaign, while 29 percent have written a letter or called on a public official and 30 percent have donated to a political candidate or campaign.<sup>70</sup> In November 2012, Cyrus Habib of Washington shattered a political glass ceiling by becoming the first Iranian American elected to a state legislature.<sup>71</sup> His campaign received support from Iranian Americans throughout the country. Many others are bound to follow in his footsteps, adding to the amazing story of Iranian American assimilation.

There is much that the Iranian American community has to accomplish over the next few decades. As a well-educated and highly accomplished immigrant community, Iranian Americans have much to contribute to the economic, social, and cultural fabric of America. As they do so, they will certainly continue to ensure that their rich heritage, values for peace and progress, and their desire to be productive members of their new country are pursued. This renewed vigor also provides hope for closer transnational ties between the people of Iran and those in the U.S. and a more open and positive relationship between the two countries. The United States, Iran, and the world will be much more successful as a result.

---

<sup>69</sup> Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, *Backlash 9/11*.

<sup>70</sup> "2013 National Public Opinion Survey," 11.

<sup>71</sup> "Candidate Makes History, Becoming First Iranian American Elected to a State Legislature." PAAIA website. Available at <http://www.paaia.org/CMS/candidate-makes-history-becoming-first-Iranian-American-elected-to-a-state-legislature.aspx>

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alba, Richard and Nee, Victor. "Rethinking Assimilation For a New Era of Immigration." *International Migration Review* 31 (4): 863.
- Bakalian, Anny P., and Mehdi Bozorgmehr. *Backlash 9/11: Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans Respond*. University of California Press, 2009.
- Bakalian, Anny P. and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, "Muslim American Mobilization." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 7–43.
- Barkan, E.R. *Immigrants in American History: Arrival, Adaptation, and Integration*. ABC-CLIO, 2012.
- Barkan, Elliott Robert, Editor. "The Hostage Crisis and Integration of Iranians in the United States." *Immigrants in American History: Arrival, Adaptation, and Integration*. Vol. 3. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2013. 1002. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*.
- Bozorgmehr, Mehdi. "Behind the Backlash: Muslim Americans after 9/11." *Contemporary Sociology* 41, no. 3 (May 2012): 358–59. doi:10.1177/0094306112443520cc.
- Bozorgmehr, Mehdi, "Diaspora," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, Vol. VII, Fasc. 4, pp. 370-387; available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/diaspora>
- Bozorgmehr, Mehdi, "From Iranian Studies to Studies of Iranians in the United States." *Iranian Studies* 31, no. 1 (January 1, 1998): 5–30. doi:10.2307/4311116.
- Bozorgmehr, Mehdi and Sabagh, Georges (1988) 'High Status Immigrants: A Statistical Profile of Iranians in the United States', *Iranian Studies*.
- Bozorgmehr, Mehdi, "Internal Ethnicity: Iranians in Los Angeles." *Sociological Perspectives* 40, no. 3 (January 1, 1997): 387–408. doi:10.2307/1389449.
- Bozorgmehr, Mehdi. "Iran." In Waters, M.C., R. Ueda, and H.B. Marrow. *The New Americans: A Guide to Immigration since 1965*. Harvard University Press Reference Library. Harvard University Press, 2009, 469-478.
- Bozorgmehr, Mehdi, Claudia Der-Martirosian, and Georges Sabagh. "Middle Easterners: A New Kind of Immigrant." In *Ethnic Los Angeles*, 345–78. New York, NY, USA: Russel Sage Foundation, 1996.
- Bozorgmehr, Mehdi and Douglas, Daniel (2011) 'Success(ion):Second Generation Iranian Americans', *Iranian Studies*, 44: 1, 3-24
- Bozorgmehr, Mehdi and George Sabagh. "Survey Research among Middle Eastern Immigrant Groups in the United States: Iranians in Los Angeles." *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 23, no. 1 (July 1, 1989): 23–34. doi:10.2307/41888056.
- Chaichian, Mohammad A. "First Generation Iranian Immigrants and the Question of Cultural Identity: The Case of Iowa." *International Migration Review* 31, no. 3 (October 1, 1997): 612–27. doi:10.2307/2547288.
- Curtis, Glenn E. and Hooglund, Eric. *Iran: A Country Study*, edited by (Library of Congress, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., 2008).
- Dana, Leo Paul, editor. *Handbook of Research on Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship: A Co-evolutionary View on Resource Management*, Northampton, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2001.

- Ferdowsi, Ali. "Hajj Sayyah," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, XI/5, pp. 556-60, and XI/6, pp.561; available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hajj-sayyah> (accessed online at 26 June 2013).
- Gold, Steven J., and Mehdi Bozorgmehr. "Middle East and North Africa." In *The New*, 518–33. First. C: Harv, 2007.
- H.R.3525 Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002, n.d.  
<http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/F?c107:1:./temp/~c107462FSF:e40118>:
- Hanassab, Shideh, and Romeria Tidwell. "Intramariage and Intermariage: Young Iranians in Los Angeles." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 22, no. 4 (November 1, 1998): 395–408. doi:10.1016/S0147-1767(98)00015-7.
- Hakimzadeh, Shirin (2006). "Iran: A Vast Diaspora Abroad and Millions of Refugees at Home." Migration Policy Institute; available online at <http://www.migrationinformation.org/feature/display.cfm?ID=424>
- Iranian Studies Group at MIT, Iranian American Community Survey Results, 2005". Web.mit.edu. Retrieved November 28, 2011.
- Jenks, Rosemary. "The Enhanced Border Security and Visa Reform Act of 2002, H.R. 3525." Center For Immigration Studies, June 2002. Accessed November 6, 2013.  
<http://cis.org/EnhancedBorderSecurityVisaReformAct2002-HR3525>
- Kohanloo, Michelle. "IABA, NIAC and IAPAC Hold Unity Campaign." NIAC (National Iranian American Council), December 1, 2002. Accessed November 6, 2013.  
[http://www.niacouncil.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5821&security=1&news\\_iv\\_ctrl=1063](http://www.niacouncil.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5821&security=1&news_iv_ctrl=1063)
- Mahdi, Ali Akbar. "Ethnic Identity among Second-Generation Iranians in the United States." *Iranian Studies* 31, no. 1 (January 1, 1998): 77–95. doi:10.2307/4311120.
- McCann, Joseph T. *Terrorism on American Soil: A Concise History of Plots and Perpetrators from the Famous to the Forgotten*. Boulder, Sentient Publications, 2006, 141.
- Mills, Gregory J., "Beyond the Backlash: Muslim and Middle Eastern Immigrants' Experiences in America, Ten Years Post-9/11" (2012). *Graduate School Theses and Dissertations*.
- Mobasher. "Iranians and Iranian Americans, 1940–Present." In *Immigrants in American History: Arrival, Adaptation, and Integration.*, 999–1010, 2013.
- Mobasher, Mohsen M. *Iranians in Texas: Migration, Politics, and Ethnic Identity*. University of Texas Press, 2012), 2.
- Modarres, Ali. "Settlement Patterns of Iranians in the United States." *Iranian Studies* 31, no. 1 (January 1, 1998): 31–49. doi:10.2307/4311117.
- Mostofi, Nilou. "Who We Are: The Perplexity of Iranian-American Identity." *The Sociological Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (October 1, 2003): 681–703. doi:10.2307/4120728.
- Naficy, Hamid. *The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles*. U of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Portes, Alejandro. *Immigrant America: A Portrait*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.
- Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans. "Public Opinion Survey of American Perception of Iranian Americans." Commissioned by the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA) and conducted by Zogby International. December 2008. Available online at <http://www.paaia.org/CMS/Data/Sites/1/PDFs/finalreport-surveyofamericanperceptions.pdf>.

- Rumbaut, Rubén G. "The Coming of the Second Generation: Immigration and Ethnic Mobility in Southern California." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 620 (November 1, 2008): 196–236.
- Sabagh, Georges, and Mehdi Bozorgmehr. "Are the Characteristics of Exiles Different from Immigrants? The Case of Iranians in Los Angeles." Institute for Social Science Research, May 1, 1986. <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/54d5s0q5>.
- Sensenbrenner, F. "H.R.3525 - 107th Congress (2001-2002): Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002." Legislation, May 14, 2002. <http://beta.congress.gov/bill/107th-congress/house-bill/3525>.
- Waters, M.C., R. Ueda, and H.B. Marrow. *The New Americans: A Guide to Immigration since 1965*. Harvard University Press Reference Library. Harvard University Press, 2009. [http://books.google.com/books?id=z-y\\_q4J\\_eCEC](http://books.google.com/books?id=z-y_q4J_eCEC).
- "Welcome to the Annual Persian Parade." New York Persian Parade, n.d. <http://www.nypp.org/dynamic.asp?fmt=f&id=parade>.
- Zarrabian, Ellie, Ph.D. "Personality Change and Identity Formation in Iranian Americans." From the website of *Centerpiece Foundation: A Holistic Center for Psychotherapy & Spirituality*." Available online at: <http://centeronpeace.com/index.php/personality-change-Iranian-Americans/>