
Iranian Refugees in America: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Introduction

This booklet was developed in response to the need of various organizations, institutions, local communities and individuals who deal with Iranian refugees in the United States.

In the second half of the 1970s a growing number of Iranian students came to this country to attend American universities. Many of these students chose to remain here when revolution broke out in Iran, and many have now become permanent residents. Since the beginning of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, refugees from Iran have also been coming to this country, and although their number does not compare to that of Southeast Asian refugees, they constitute a significant and growing refugee population in the United States. In some highly-impacted areas such as Los Angeles, large ethnic Iranian communities have developed.

This booklet will help to give those working with Iranians a better idea of their history and culture and hopefully eliminate, or at least illuminate, some of the misunderstandings that usually occur when different cultural values and systems are first brought into daily interaction. Of course, an entire culture can not be explained in a handbook, and what is written here should be understood as general guidelines and salient points. It should furthermore be remembered that we are speaking here in generalizations, and there is a considerable amount of variation from one individual Iranian to another.

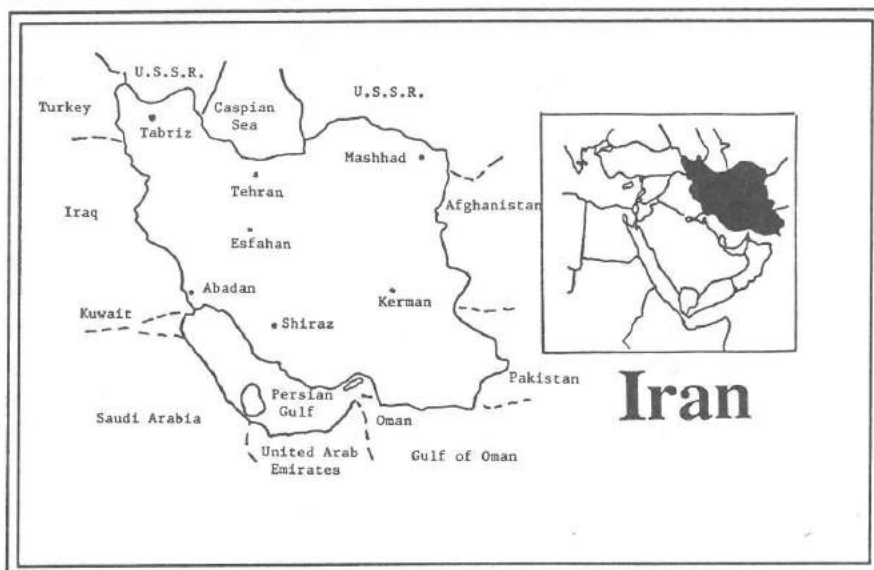
It has been the experience of the Bahá'í Community, whose 100,000 members in this country include about 7,000 Iranians, that integration takes place more rapidly and more easily when the newly-arrived refugees are not settled in

areas where there is already a large ethnic Iranian community (such as Los Angeles, New York City, etc.). The more contact the new refugees have with Americans, the more quickly they will become functioning members of the society around them.

A companion volume is also available in Persian, which attempts to highlight certain salient features of American culture and society for the Iranian refugees.

Modern Iran

Iran is a country of 630,000 square miles, about the same size as the southwestern United States—California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona combined. The population of Iran is approximately 43 million people, which is about the same as England. Iran is bordered on the east by Pakistan and Afghanistan, on the north by the Caspian Sea and the Soviet Union, in the west by Turkey and Iraq, and to the south by the Persian Gulf.



Although we have been conditioned to think of Iran and Iranians as a monolithic entity, in reality Iran is a very diverse country. For example, in addition to the Shi'ite majority, there are many Sunnis (especially among the Kurds and Turkmen), about 350,000 Baha'is, 200,000 Christians, 70,000 Jews, and 25,000 Zoroastrians.

Despite the fact that Persian (Farsi) is the official language of Iran and the primary vehicle of Iranian culture and history, nearly half the country's population speaks a mother tongue

other than Persian. Additional languages include Azari, Turkish, Armenian, Arabic and several other Iranian dialects. All Iranian school children, however, are taught in Persian.

There are many regional dialects, and regional differences of culture. To the northwest, between the borders of Turkey and the Soviet Union, lies the province of Azarbayjan and its capital city, Tabriz. This area is largely populated by Azari Turks, whose mother tongue is a blend of Turkish and Persian.

The western part of Iran is populated by a large number of Kurds, who have a strong sense of ethnic identity and have been agitating, along with the Kurds of Iraq, for political autonomy. To the south, in the area where most of the fighting with Iraq has been taking place, many Iranians of Arab heritage live. There are also nomadic tribes of Turkish ancestry like the Qashqa'i, who live in the central areas of the country.

Tehran, on the other hand, is a sprawling urban metropolis, in many ways like any large modern city of the west. It is the capital of the country, and with a population of about 6 million, has about as many inhabitants as Chicago and Los Angeles combined. Most Iranians probably spent at least some time in Tehran before coming to the United States.

Urban refugees from the major cities in Iran like Tehran, Shiraz, Abadan, Tabriz and Isfahan will not have as much difficulty adjusting to life in the United States. They will be well-accustomed to western goods and some western customs. Refugees coming directly from small towns and villages, however, may need some kind of orientation to western products and appliances, etc. However, the literacy rate for Iran is high for the Third World, so the overwhelming majority of the

refugees will be literate in Persian, and may have at least some familiarity with English (in the case of younger Iranians) or French (usually in the case of older Iranians), both of which were taught in the schools as a second language.

Persian Names

FIRST NAMES

During the nineteenth century in Iran, male children were often named after the revered heroes of Shi'i Islam; Muhammad (after the Prophet), 'Ali (after the son-in-law of the Prophet and the first Imam of the Shi'ites), Husayn (after 'Ali's martyred son), Reza (after the eighth Imam) were common names. Girls were often named after Shi'ite heroines like Fatimeh (the daughter of Muhammad). Many of these names are still popular, and are often used in combination, as in the boy's names Muhammad-Ali and Muhammad-Reza. Frequently the attributes of God are used as first names, as in Rahmatollah (the Mercy of God) or Qodratollah (the Might of God).

Nowadays Persian names tend to be chosen from ancient Iranian history and mythology. Some of the favorite men's names are Manuchehr, Farhad or Bahram, legendary historical figures from pre-Islamic Iran. Some popular women's names include Roya (dream or vision), Naheed (Venus), Mozhdah (glad-tidings), Forough (splendor) and Ferdows (paradise).

LAST NAMES

Until about sixty years ago when Reza Shah (the father of the late Shah) passed laws requiring all Iranians to adopt a first and last name along western lines, Persian last names were often derived from the name of the city where the indi-

vidual was born or the city where he lived. Let's take, for example, the famous poet Omar Khayyam Nayshaburi. His given name is Omar; Khayyam, which means "tent-maker," refers to the profession of his father (as in the English family names Baker, Smith, Shoemaker, etc.); finally, he was from the city of Nayshabur in eastern Iran, and hence, Nayshaburi (of Nayshabur) is added to his name (as in some medieval European names, like Julian of Norwich, St. Francis of Assisi, etc).

Many modern Persian last names were derived from this principle, after the city where someone was born. For example, the following names are common: Kirmani, Tehrani, Shirazi, Sanandaji, Isfahani, Tabrizi, Yazdi, etc.

Other modern Persian family names were derived from the father's first name, along the same pattern as the English surnames Johnson, Jackson, Peterson, etc. The Persian suffixes "Zadeh" and "Pur" mean "born of" or "son of" and are used in connection with a male ancestor's name, as in the last names Alizadeh, Hassanzadeh, Radpur, Behzadpur, etc.

Iranians will generally expect those who don't know them personally to address them by their last names (e.g., Mr. Jamalzadeh, Mrs. Deilamian, etc.).

Because Persian is written in a different script, the English spelling of Persian names may vary. For example, Isfahani/Esfahani, Mohammed/Muhammad, Roohani/Rouhani/Ruhani etc. are simply different ways of transliterating the same Persian names.

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