

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: DISCOURSE AND DISSENT IN THE  
DIASPORA: CIVIC AND POLITICAL LIVES  
OF IRANIAN AMERICANS

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This study examines the political agency of Iranian immigrants. Through the rhetorical device of “political talk” which encompasses politically- and civically-oriented discourse, action and ideology, this research follows political talk as it presents itself in two locations within the public sphere: in the life course of Iranian Americans, and through online discourse. Methods used included a combination of conventional ethnography (participant observation, informal interviews, life history interviews), and virtual ethnography to develop a typology of political and civic action. Life history interviews provided an understanding of the meanings informants assigned to political and civic action within the larger trajectory of their lives, especially within the context of migration experiences. Virtual ethnography involved the analysis of three different Iranian digital diaspora communities.

First, this research found that the civic and political spheres of engagement are linked, and that Iranian immigrants use organizations to learn participatory democracy. It illustrates how ethnic organizations, online and offline, act as both vehicles and activators for immigrant political participation and further civic

engagement in the U.S. Additionally, this research uncovers how factors (age at migration, length of time in U.S., particular migration experience) impact notions of belonging and solidarity. It unpacks immigrant political agency to demonstrate the range of behaviors and activities which constitute political and civic participation. It contributes to understanding modes of citizenship and belonging by relating individual, historical, and situational variables in order to understand the relationship between homeland events, immigrant politicization and political behavior. Analysis of the three digital communities evidenced the multiple ways that digital diasporas can be a forum for engaging politically and in creating political community by allowing for a diversity of voices. Finally, merging conventional and virtual ethnography highlighted the dominant discourses about participation in larger society, and demonstrated the formation of a distinctly Iranian-American civil society.

DISCOURSE AND DISSENT IN THE DIASPORA: THE CIVIC AND POLITICAL  
LIVES OF IRANIAN AMERICANS.

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
2013

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## **Preface**

The product of a mixed parentage—and Iranian father and Mexican American mother made us a rarity, especially in Texas where I did the majority of my growing up. My family’s background was set apart for another reason. My parents met in San Antonio, Texas when my mother (from a tiny Texas border town where some of the streets are still not paved) was working as a secretary at Lackland Air Force Base and my father, a pilot with the Iranian Imperial Air Force was sent by the Iranian government for training in the late 1950s. That was in a different era of diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Iran-- friends then, enemies now! My parents married in 1960 and moved to Iran. All of us three children were born there, unlike most of the other Iranian “halfies” I might encounter in the United States. California was like a dream to me with its vibrant landscaping, blue skies, and the Pacific Ocean. It was my parents’ favored vacation spot because we could stay with extended family. In Texas, we were fairly isolated from other Iranians. In San Diego, being a tourist in La Jolla, you couldn’t walk 10 feet without hearing someone speak Farsi, the most common language spoken in Iran.

Not following in the dominant and prevailing tradition of anthropological field research, I am “home” in conducting fieldwork. Though I did not grow up in San Diego, or California, for that matter I have had extended family there for years and it is now my home as an adult parent, raising children in San Diego. I have lived in San Diego three years now. Because of this, the repercussions of which I cannot always

grasp, the edges of fieldwork are blurred to these moments of heightened interaction I describe above. Where does fieldwork begin and end for me?<sup>1</sup>

In what follows here in the Preface and through the Introduction, I arduously describe how I arrived at my research problem, which is centered on the manifestation of political “talk” in different arenas among Iranian Americans. Perhaps I am making myself “vulnerable” (Behar 1996) to write about all these wanderings, and to expose my structure as visible through showing the natural history of its derivation.

I now realize that the seeds of this research were implanted in me through enculturation as a child. As such it is deeply personal and intertwined with my growing up years-- on the fringes of Iranian culture as a person with a trifurcated identity (Iranian, Mexican/South Texas, American) during many long evenings of *meyhmoon*i (social visits with food) at the homes of other Iranians and hearing daily telephone conversations my Iranian father had with his friends where the debate topic was politics—Iranian politics—always heated and passionate. Fast forward two or three decades, and the topics and people change but the overall scene remains the same.

My partial insider status to Iranian culture as a member of its 1.25 generation (Rumbaut 2004) population allowed me to understand that this was more than just my dad and his friends-- Iranians *seem* to be more political. However I still had no understanding about *why* Iranians engage in more political talk. I wished to understand this political talk better—why do Iranian immigrants continue to talk

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<sup>1</sup> I do not want to ignore the existing anthropological literature on studying at home or being “native” among your informants. However, I still maintain that leaving home to study others is still the principal trope in anthropology.

about home politics when they live abroad? Further does all of this political talk translate to political action, involvement in civic life in the United States, or into greater political understandings and engagement with politics?

My insider status to American culture allowed me to understand that politics was one thing that you just did not talk about with your friends in the U.S. Discussing politics and religion among a circle of people is taboo—it might invite arguments or create unnecessary tension and division among friends. Friends' or acquaintances' political leanings and ideology have sometimes been such a dark hole, that I have often been surprised to later find out where they fall on the political or ideological spectrum.

Among Iranians on the other hand, I observed, passionate and loud politically-oriented debates during *meyhmoon* that were no big deal afterwards for the people involved. Indeed, I do not think it is uncommon for Iranians with sometimes drastically different political ideologies not only to be friends but to also actually express these views amongst each other with no ill will afterwards. One perspective could argue that it is Iran's repressive politics and policies towards its citizens that initially politicizes its citizens, wherever they find themselves. This was certainly the viewpoint of one of my informants. Another possibility is the collective trauma of being displaced from your homeland as a result of 1979 Iranian Revolution puts you in the same boat as your compatriots, and that for the most part though your ideologies may differ you likely share and distaste for your homeland government.

If the first reason for developing a research question was based on personal experience, the second impetus for developing the research question is observational,

and evolved out of witnessing with outrage and sadness how the Iranian government cracked down on protesters in the streets and other dissidents in the aftermath of the June 2009 re-election of Iranian President Ahmadinejad. Yet I also witnessed with great interest how the political turmoil in their homeland ignited Iranian immigrants all over the world—what I will later theorize as the Iranian diaspora—for a common cause. I saw previously apathetic Iranians participating in rallies and marches throughout Europe and the United States, and circulating anti-government messages through Facebook, YouTube and other virtual means of communication. My Iranian relatives and friends were genuinely engaged and excited about post-election events. It was as if they saw a rip in the shroud with light peeking through. Among some exiles, I heard hope that an eventual return to Iran would be possible soon.

My initial work with this topic began with my specialization in studies of immigrant groups during graduate school. This provided the third impetus to formulate my research question. The June 2009 events happened as I was completing my PhD requirements. I had participated in theoretical discussions about immigrant and transnational identities working at the Smithsonian and at the University of Maryland throughout my Masters of Applied Anthropology degree, but could now expand to consider the politics of middle-class and “elite” immigrants.

As a scholar broadly interested in the migration process, especially in how it intersects with ideas of citizenship and belonging, there were so many exciting research avenues to explore using the June 2009 event as a trigger to understand immigrant politics, including the role of new media in re-shaping politics from afar, the participation of youth and second generation Iranians in emerging social



movements, how people use social networks across vast spaces to affect change, the meaning and significance of these networks, the relationship between involvement in homeland politics and other forms of political/civic participation, how diasporas contribute to the political development of their homeland, etc. I had all these potentialities in mind when I moved away from Maryland in October 2009 to enter the field and my new residence in San Diego, California.

In what follows here I consider Iranian immigrant political agency as expressed through their organizations and associations.

## **Dedication**

Dedicated to two generations past and one generation future:

-To my grandparent forbearers, rural people separated on two continents that could never have imagined my life now and its possibilities.

-To my parents who gave me all the tools, to the best that they could.

-To my children, Zari and Julian, the little whirling dervishes who simultaneously tilt me off my axis and keep me balanced. There is something divine and magical in that.

## **Acknowledgements**

I need to thank the individuals, my informants, who allowed me a peek into their lives, and the time and patience they showed me. It has been to my benefit that Iranians have a great respect and appreciation for the pursuit of knowledge and intellect. I would also like to acknowledge the two organizations in San Diego with which I have had the most contact, Persian Cultural Center (and Iranian School of San Diego) and the Association of Iranian American Professionals, and their associated leadership and members.

I am grateful for the prolonged and continued support throughout this journey from the Anthropology Department and the Graduate School at the University of Maryland College Park. These sources of funding include a three-year departmental fellowship with full support (AY 2007-10), the Anthropology Chair's Fellowship (AY 2010-2011), Graduate School summer fellowship (2011), tuition aid from the department (AY 2011-2012) and finally the Ann G. Wylie Dissertation Writing Fellowship (Fall 2012). I appreciate their personal commitment to seeing me finish, and giving me the resources at various times to do so. It seems I will be one of the first graduates of their newly minted PhD program—not something I strove for but an honor nonetheless. I hope to do the program and department proud in my future endeavors.

I would like to recognize members of my committee, Michael Paolisso who as Director of Graduate Studies was not shy to call me their “guinea pig” but whose expertise on anthropological methods I appreciate. Also, John Caughey in American Studies, Lisa Mar in History, and John Grayzel, former Baha'i Chair for World Peace at the Center for International Development and Conflict Management for the

different perspectives they brought to the table. I learned much about life history methods from Dr. Caughey, a historical perspective on immigration studies from Dr. Mar, and identity and development from Dr. Grayzel.

And finally I am indebted to the chair of my committee, Judith Freidenberg, who I will never forget, crowned herself as my academic midwife and met the news of my first pregnancy with such joy and support. Judith never wavered in her faith in me and my potential. Judith spent many, many hours through the years advising in-person over the telephone or through Skype, reading and commenting all the drafts I ever wrote about anything, and worked through with me through the change in research design for the dissertation. For all her work and support, I appreciate.

My family has made immeasurable contributions. My parents Hossein and Victoria Zarpour from afar and up close, my sister Theresa Zolfeghari in Sweden with kind and supportive words, and my brother Amir Zarpour who spent long hours on the phone discussing and debating ideas. Though he is a techie by profession, I swear he was a famous social scientist in another life. I am more than grateful for my in-laws (Anne, Kate, and Joan O'Donnell). Though my husband has a small family, they have been astounding with their offers of childcare (always in short order in a one-income household), and other forms of support through the years. My Iranian extended family stateside, Ammeh Akram Zarpour and cousins Homa Javidi, Haleh Javidi (especially her husband Kamran Hamasian), and Bahman Javidi who pointed the way and also provided many warm and lovely meals together.

Thank you to circles of friends and colleagues from my past lives—San Antonio, Witte, Dartmouth, Maryland, Smithsonian, etc. who have cheered me on through cyberspace. Thanks Facebook for helping my “worlds collide”!

Finally to my best friend and partner of over a dozen years, my husband Sean O’Donnell, who has paid the cost of this journey more than anyone-- sacrificing time, resources and mental health at times. I cannot wait to start the next phase of our lives together.

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## **Chapter 1 Introduction to the Setting and The Natural History of the Research Plan**

In San Diego, California to be an Iranian and visit other Iranians in an informal manner such as *mehymoon* (meaning party, but really any social gathering at someone's home with food) or formally such as in a meeting, you must first get in your car and drive. The drive will involve only surface streets if you are lucky, but usually also include getting on one of the sun-bleached highways that runs north -to-south paralleling the Pacific coastline, or west-to-east taking you from pockets of neighborhoods nestled between and on top of mesas. Streets and neighborhoods end precipitously at the edges of canyons. Flying above in an airplane it is easy to see from this bird's eye view that San Diego is really a city composed of assemblages of houses and other buildings sitting atop lonely mesas interconnected by only a network of roads. When visiting Iranian friends or family no one will live too far south closer to the border or too far east beyond Poway, which is in San Diego's North County. La Jolla and Del Mar followed by Encinitas are the most desirable and expensive locales. In conversations with new people, others might try to discern your station in life by asking what part of town you live in.



Figure 2 San Diego County Map *credit: www.entersandiego.com*

Living here is not like being in Iran—no drop in visits by neighbors. In the case of mehmooni, it has usually been pre-arranged ahead of time through a phone call or email. As for the meetings they are scheduled monthly or weekly in some cases. Either way they

are calendared and known about and planned for, with email reminders and opportunities to check in on Facebook.

Besides this kind of social visiting you can get together with fellow countrymen by attending some of the yearly cultural festivals based on the ancient Zoroastrian calendar. The biggest one being *Nowruz*, the Persian New Year observed the first day of spring and its attendant events and festivities. Other than parties and celebrations directly related to Nowruz, the other events include *Chaharshanbeh Soori*<sup>2</sup> that precedes the New Year as the last Wednesday of the year, and *Sizdeh Bidar*, the succeeding event that follows thirteen days after the New Year. Both these cases have their own public festivals organized by local Iranian-ethnic grassroots organizations and sponsored by local Iranian-owned businesses.

Chaharshanbeh Soori which means “burnt Wednesday” involves jumping over huge bonfires to ward off evil spirits in anticipation of the New Year. Sizdeh Bidar means the “thirteenth outside” and occurs on the thirteenth day of the New Year in the Iranian calendar, and involves an all-day picnic outdoors. Both events take place in meticulously landscaped and manicured parks in tune with the Iranian sense of aesthetics, love of gardens, and penchant for picnics.<sup>3</sup> According to one longtime local leader, these events comprise the largest gathering of Iranians in San Diego in a public space for a public purpose.

Chaharshanbeh Soori actually starts Tuesday night around seven o’clock for the public events that the local Iranian non-profits organize. It takes place in the darkness of

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<sup>2</sup> See glossary for explanation of Farsi terms.

<sup>3</sup> Eating outdoors to celebrate nature harks back to ancient Zoroastrian values. Slightly lesser known celebrations and special events take place around the winter solstice (Yalda) or fall equinox (Mehregan).

evening time and has more of an outdoor party atmosphere. There is an obligatory bonfire on the sandy beach nearby but what predominates is the smell of kabob cooking and deejay music emanating from a raised stage, with a large screen flashing sponsorship information.

Local Iranian-ethnic organizations call Sizdeh Bidar “Nature Day” in their advertisements, and in San Diego over the past several years Sizdeh Bidar takes place in a public park situated near the water. Imagine a huge grassy lawn the size of almost four city blocks completely filled with a patchwork of picnic blankets, colorful Persian *sofrehs* (mats), pop-up tents topped with flags, lawn chairs, and charcoal grills. You will see three or four generations of Iranian-descended families mingling, cracking jokes as they crack open pistachios, and of course gossiping about mutual friends and acquaintances. Attendees will visit friends and associates in other picnic spots and it is like being invited to their home. You and they will engage in *ta’arof*<sup>4</sup>-- you will be offered a cup of hot *cha’i* (tea) and whatever is being eaten. There seems to be a competition for the nicest, most substantial looking picnic set-up. Throughout the course of the days, groups of people--ladies arm-in-arm with men ambling behind, will promenade throughout the picnic grounds slyly inspecting the other picnic set-ups for someone they might know and check out what is being eaten.

These rituals and celebrations are simultaneously pre-Islamic<sup>5</sup> and self-consciously

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<sup>4</sup> Ta’arof, encompassing a wide range of behaviors and contexts, is the name given for the Iranian cultural model governing the etiquette for civility and reciprocity where self-deference and social rank is emphasized.

<sup>5</sup> The cultural celebrations described here are Zoroastrian holdovers, practices that date to around the 6th century B.C.E. This was the religion of Greater Iran until the Arab invasion and advent of Islam in 636.

Persian<sup>6</sup>. To use Naficy's (1993) term, these manifestations of archaic Persian heritage are examples of "fetishism" that occurs among Iranian migrants, meaning that Iranian immigrants tend to imagine these ancient Persian celebrations as upholding all the values and markers of their Iranian identity. According to Mobasher (2006), "By... emphasizing the cultural significance of Persian heritage, community organizers and political activists find an opportunity to construct a political community, express their grievances, and mobilize for collective action against the Iranian government," (114). I observed, however, that for the average attendee, though they may harbor anti-Islamic Republic of Iran sentiment, which is not uncommon for Iranian immigrants, these cultural events offer one of the few chances to gather with compatriots en masse to enjoy each other's company and celebrate the Iranian New Year.

Other opportunities to gather with fellow Iranians include a calendar of special events related to Iranian expressive culture—music concerts, poetry readings, film showings, and traditional dance organized by the local Iranian voluntary organizations, the same ones that organize the festivals described above. Beyond these kinds of cultural and arts events, the meetings of these Iranian grassroots organizations, or perhaps the Iranian grocery store, the only way to encounter Iranians is through meyhmooni.

Meyhmooni means "party" in Farsi but in reality it includes almost any social visit centered around sharing a meal. It can be a birthday party, wedding celebration, or just having friends over for dinner. Meyhmooni involves the private realm of the home, inviting others to your home or visiting others in their home. I do not want to downplay the importance of these intimate social gatherings in the lives of Iranians, indeed I have

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<sup>6</sup> Here, distinguishing Persian ethnicity from plethora of other past and present ethnic groups in Iran (Dabashi 2004). Persian ethnicity has been constructed as the national ethnicity of Iran, and dominant over others such as Armenian, Azeri, Kurd, Jewish, etc.

observed that it is through meyhmooni that Iranians maintain their connection to co-ethnics, and the happenings in Iran both in discussing and debating the political events of their homeland and in exchanging information about friends and family.

Iranian immigrants express their identity and heritage as Iranians through meyhmooni, and through ta'arof which is at its best through meyhmooni. When visiting someone's home there are a set of expectations about the order, timing and content of the various components of the gathering. Upon first arriving, exchanging pleasantries, inquiring about the health and state of family members, etc. there is a first round of tea is offered, with candies, fruits and nuts on display as accompaniments. Sometime after, the meal is served. There will never be just one main dish and a couple of sides. There will always be several main dishes (usually a meat-based stewed with vegetables, called *khoresh*), huge platters of white, fluffy rice, and other dishes of greens, pickled vegetables, salad, yogurt, etc. After the meal is over, the host and guests will sit down for more chatting. This is followed by another round of tea, this time with pastries as well as candies, fruits and nuts. My own efforts at hosting Iranians for lunch or dinner filled me with a sense of “not being able to do it quite right”—maybe my diversity of dishes was not enough, perhaps I did not offer the tea quick enough, or maybe I just resented the gendered obligation of meyhmooni. Meyhmooni and ta'arof are indeed a tricky business.

Because of the culturally-conditioned suspicion of outsiders Iranians have and the ways certain kinds of information are guarded or out rightly concealed (one informant actually brought up the Iranian habit of using “harmless, white lies” to protect one's privacy, reputation, pride, sense of self, etc), and because of the discrete and finite nature

of meyhmooni networks here, it is difficult for an outsider to San Diego such as myself to break into *new* meyhmooni networks, beyond those somehow connected to family.

Even if it was possible for me to acquaint myself into several new meyhmooni networks and get myself invited to people's homes on a regular basis, plunging myself in the middle of political talk that may have sprung up during meyhmooni would have been awkward and out of context. First is the issue of being 1.5 generation and being perceived as more American, with perhaps little interest or knowledge of the day-to-day current affairs in Iran. As a member of a different generation than those that migrated as adults, the cause of emigration usually related to the 1979 Iranian revolution, I never experienced Iran before or after the Revolution other than as a small child. In other words, it was correctly perceived by others that I have no significant "life material," or experience as fodder against the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) to even participate in these discussions.

The second reason I might not have broken into the privacy of certain kinds of dialogues during meyhmooni was my gender. While meyhmooni is definitely a family event with both genders participating, circles of conversation tend to break apart by gender. Though, it is not a strict structure and there is fluidity and movement between circles of exchange. Discussion flowed around life events, health of family members, jobs, and progress of children and household sitting in a chatting circle surrounded by other women. In this context politics was not a topic of conversation. On the other hand, I did observe that among men, politics was a potential discussion topic. Someone might tell an anti-Islamic Republic of Iran joke, show something on YouTube, or make the conversation turn by bringing up a news story. For these reasons it was difficult to use

meyhmooni as an opportunity to engage informants in not only political talk, but going further to open up about their own political ideologies and participation in civic and political spheres.

All in all, to be an Iranian in San Diego is to blend in with the landscape of middle class and upper middle class life in southern California. As will be discussed later in this chapter, Iranian immigrants are relatively wealthy and more educated than other recently-arrived immigrants. Likewise, they are fairly well acculturated into American life, being economically and linguistically integrated. There are no ethnic enclaves here, no super concentration of Iranian-owned ethnic businesses as in “Teheran-geles” located in the Westwood neighborhood of Los Angeles. Even the grocery stores like North Park Produce or Balboa Market, which are in separate parts of town, might have majority Iranian clientele, yet actually cater to other minority groups as well like Arabs, Nigerians, Ethiopians, etc.

For the reasons discussed above, I reasoned that I would learn more about political talk by staying within the public, rather than the private, realm of communication. I determined gatherings of Iranians were the ideal situation for understanding more about political talk, but informal and private gatherings based on contact with extensive meyhmooni networks were closed off to me. Most public kinds of gatherings of Iranians in San Diego are planned, organized and controlled by Iranian organizations. Therefore, focusing on Iranian ethnic-based grassroots voluntary associations became a natural choice for gaining entry. I quickly realized, however, that the number and diversity of such organizations is actually few in San Diego, unlike in other large settlements of Iranians in places like Orange County and Los Angeles.



I classify these Iranian ethnic-based grassroots organizations as voluntary associations, according to Kerri's (1976) definition that a voluntary association is a private group more or less formally organized, joined and maintained by members pursuing a common interest, and usually by means of part-time and unpaid activities.<sup>7</sup> These few Iranian voluntary associations in San Diego, through their serving as a nexus of people and interests, they coalesce major community players and control social life in the public sphere through organizing: big cultural festivals centered on Nowruz and other celebrations, a slate of events related to Iranian arts and music, and other civic causes.<sup>8</sup> This is distinct from meyhmooni that serves similar functions in the private sphere. Most of these Iranian voluntary associations are no older than thirty years and their foundings date to just around the time of the 1979 Iranian Revolution when there were enough Iranian immigrant community members to come together for a common purpose. Finding informants through Iranian voluntary associations was a way to locate civically and politically minded Iranian Americans that could shed light on the subject of political ideologies and participation.

### ***Background: June 2009 Events and Beyond***

Iran's tenth presidential election was held June 12, 2009 with incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad running against three challengers. The next morning Iran's official news agency, the Islamic Republic News Agency, announced that President Ahmadinejad had won the election with 62% of the votes. The opposing candidates challenged the results and alleged vote rigging. Their supporters took to the streets over

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<sup>7</sup> Throughout this work I will interchangeably use Iranian ethnic-based grassroots organizations as voluntary associations.

<sup>8</sup> Some examples would be a Farsi language school which meets weekly and has over 300 students, and an association for Iranian professionals that holds monthly meetings with guest speakers, as well as happy hours and nature walks.

the next few weeks in massive demonstrations to protest the voting irregularities (Katzman 2010, Ehsani, Keshavarzian and Moruzzi 2009). At least 30 people were killed and more than 1,000 arrested in the wave of protests that followed. The Iranian elections, considered fraudulent by many inside in Iran and commentators outside Iran, fomented a growing opposition movement inside of Iran. Witnesses to the June 2009 protests in Iran say that protests of this size have not been seen in Iran since the 1979 revolution (Athanasiadis June 16, 2009, Washington Times).

“Where is My Vote? (raye-man kojast)” was the motto used during protests and transmitted all over the globe. Protestors and opposition supporters manifested their disagreement with the election results to the world using newer technologies of communication and social networking, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, by the opposition movement broadcast their efforts to a worldwide audience (Grossman 2009) and helped them solidify a collective conscience regardless of their residence.

As many Iranian immigrants described to me, the images and sounds emanating from the media were so dramatic—massive groups of people wearing green and demonstrating peacefully through city streets, the brutality of Iranian police forces beating protestors, etc., that Iranian immigrants around the world felt compelled to respond in some form. The June 2009 election and its aftermath on the streets of Tehran, and other cities, was an event where their identities as members of a diaspora, as exiles, or as citizens of one country or the other, were challenged. One way in which Iranians throughout the diaspora responded to the election results was through virtual means using social media like Facebook, YouTube, blogs, Iranian expat news sites, etc. The other way was in the form of actual demonstrations throughout the U.S. and Europe.

Among the many images of protestors circulated on the Internet is one of a young Iranian-American college student connected with one of the growing number of grassroots organizations fighting for political change holding a placard that reads in Farsi, “Don’t be scared, don’t be scared. We’re all in this together” (Youth to Youth Campaign 2010). In 2010 worldwide protests took place throughout the U.S. and Europe around the anniversary of the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

A more longitudinal look at how this incidence of homeland conflict impacted individuals in a local community was *initially* one of this project’s research questions. However, now more than three years after the Presidential election of June 2009 and having spent time with a community of civically active and politically aware Iranian Americans, I cannot in good conscience place too much emphasis on the election and its repercussions, even though the Iranian election protests are widely considered to be the model for the Arab Spring of 2011 that followed 1.5 years later. Manijeh Nasrabadi, an Iranian American activist blogger makes this connection clear between the Green Movement in Iran and the Arab Spring. Her primary assertion is that the Iranian people have been rendered invisible,

We need to write the story of the Green uprising back into the story of the Arab Spring in order to understand the internal dynamics of Iranian society and to see clearly where the lines of solidarity must be drawn. Most media coverage hasn’t made this link; instead, reporting has tended to reflect the nationalist divisions in the region and to assume there is a hermetically sealed entity called the “Arab World.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Nasrabadi, Manijeh. “Iran and the U.S. Anti-War Movement.” Published May 8, 2012. <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/5441/iran-and-the-us-anti-war-movement>, accessed 20 August 2012.

Undeniably June 2009 homeland events in Iran impacted the Iranian diaspora, and I argue, was a “moment of solidarity.” While my initial research goal was to assess the impact of the June 2009 events on the Iranian diaspora in a localized place, as time has gone on now three years after that event, and through continued fieldwork, it is *questionable* as to whether June 2009 *was* a pivotal event for Iranian immigrants. The extent to which it was pivotal is determined by how we define pivotal, how we define activism and whether we are thinking of an Iranian diaspora “community” united for a common cause.

### ***Coming Together: Theoretical Approach***

For all intents and purposes, it is difficult to organize Iranians, and for Iranians to organize. First, Bozorgmehr (1998) one of the foremost social scientists concerned with the Iranian immigrant community has asserted that organizational life is lacking among Iranian immigrants in the U.S. What is distinctive about Iranians is the negligible presence of associations, and when present, their even more negligible role in the lives of Iranians. Compared to other new immigrant groups, Iranians have very few ethnic associations or organizations. As Bozorgmehr (1998:24) contends, the main explanation for this pattern is cultural: voluntary associations were uncommon in Iran. A suspicion of outsiders, tendencies to both conceal information and present oneself in the best possible light (Higgins 2004), a propensity for dissent and argumentation<sup>10</sup> in social setting as I observed, and the fact that Iranian’s homeland history of repressive governments<sup>11</sup> did not encourage the development of voluntary associations does equate to few experiences

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<sup>10</sup> Some like Bernal (2005) have said that argumentation is actually central to constituting community.

<sup>11</sup> See Chronology of Major Historical Events in Appendix 1

with formal civic structures. Local San Diego voluntary associations and online communities function as organizations for Iranian-Americans despite these supposed challenges of political history and culture.

I am interested in focusing on moments of coming together in the public sphere *outside* of celebratory festivals and events highlighting expressive culture, or outside “all the pretty stuff” as one informant characterized them.<sup>12</sup> June 2009 was such a moment of solidarity. Iranian voluntary associations are other examples of Iranian immigrants coming together to pursue common interests. Those common interests might include looking for community, discussing current political events, or easing the transition to life in the U.S.

Preliminary research starting informally starting October 2009 when I entered the field and continuing through summer 2010, one year after the June 2009 events, helped to assess the landscape of political and civic action. My preliminary fieldwork indicated that the level of engagement with homeland politics and host country civic organizations varies among Iranians. Yet they engage in political talk in social settings and express their politically-related opinion, such as in the private domain of the home and during *meyhmoonī*, much more often and without hesitation, than Americans. Secondly, I found engagement with politics in the public sphere takes place in two primary arenas. The first arena is local Iranian voluntary associations. I already described how local Iranian voluntary associations function as a nexus of people and interesting, coalescing major community and controlling social life in the public sphere through organizing cultural festivities and a slate of other events. The second arena is constituted by Iranians throughout the diaspora communicating and discussing politics online through forums

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<sup>12</sup> Beyond the “fetishized” aspects of Persian culture (*cf* Naficy 1993).

like Facebook, and diaspora websites like Iranian.com. I see these as closely related to “on-the-ground” Iranian voluntary associations in San Diego—in other words these virtual online groups of Iranians come together for a common interest on a voluntary basis,<sup>13</sup> much like San Diego-based Iranian organizations. Therefore, I am conceptualizing Iranian voluntary associations as the organizing principle to bring these two arenas of discourse together.

Voluntary associations, online and offline are where political talk takes place in the public sphere.<sup>14</sup> According to Habermas’s (1989, 1992) definition, the public sphere mediates between the private sphere and the sphere of Public Authority (the realm of the state, government, ruling class). Fraser (1990) rearticulates the public sphere as “a theater in modern societies which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk” (57) to move from the idea of one public sphere to numerous “counterspheres” and multiple and discrete places where “talk” occurs. The public sphere is an arena of social life where people come together and discuss problems and the place from which political action springs. For this study, I erect a private/public dichotomy for where political discourse among Iranians potentially occurs. The public sphere stands outside the private sphere of the home where meyhmooni takes place. Among the public sphere, organizations and associations—virtual and materials, are the vehicle through which it ensues.

Within anthropology, Kerri (1976a) provides a review of anthropological studies that consider the role of voluntary associations as adaptive mechanisms, especially

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<sup>13</sup> Online groups that I studied, and discussed more in depth in Chapter 3, 4, and 5, include two Facebook groups and one diaspora website called Iranian.com.

<sup>14</sup> Chapter 2 contains an additional discussion of the public sphere as applied to cyber communities.

among rural-urban migrants, and draws from sources dated from 1940s to 1970s. The majority of these sources cast voluntary associations in functionalist terms. Little (1965) examines the role of different kinds of voluntary associations (such as tribal unions, syncretist cults, recreation-based, mutual benefit groups, etc) among migrants in West Africa to find that such groups combine Western development aims with African traditions to fulfill functions once filled by extended family. Kerri (1976b) looks at how voluntary associations aid in the adaptation of indigenous and metis migrants to Winnipeg, Canada. Weinberg (1976) learns that voluntary associations and kinship groups of the Swiss Alps express underlying factionalism within the political system. They serve to control and defuse conflict and opposition. Anderson (1971) traces the history of voluntary associations and places their firm establishment during the Neolithic era. His concluding paragraph mitigates the impact and role of voluntary associations even among urban-industrial nations: voluntary associations contribute to the stability of society by being an intermediate social unit between the individual and the community, and they play a supportive role in social change, yet they “are the vehicles of change, not the motors of change” (218).

Brettell and Reed-Danahay (2008b), two anthropologists, state (with reference to immigration) that few contemporary anthropological sources exist about voluntary associations, especially among international migrants. Though several European scholars have begun to look at the role of organizations and in political and civic integration of immigrants in Europe, less attention has been given to this subject for post-1965 immigrants in the U.S. While there is an existing literature on organizational anthropology (Wright 1994, Schwartzman 1993, Moeran 2005, Cefkin 2010), the focus

has been on businesses; work and corporate culture; management and stratification (Baba 2006) rather than community-based voluntary organizations, especially ones with an ethnic base and civic cause.

Scholars such as Putnam (1993, 1995, 2000) in political science and Coleman (1988) in sociology have done groundbreaking work on social capital, civic organizations, and community participation. In the immigrant adaptation literature the topic of voluntary associations is only obliquely related through the loose concept of “networks”, and the social capital that flows through them as being vital resources for ethnic businesses functioning in ethnic enclaves (Portes 1998).

Social capital is a concept shared by anthropology and its sister social sciences. Distinguished from physical capital that is wholly tangible and human capital that exists in persons in the form of knowledge and skills, social capital is intangible and exists in the *relations* among and between persons (Coleman 1988). While Bourdieu (1986) focused on how social capital (or the absence of it) can reproduce inequality, Coleman (1988) focuses on how social capital functions as a resource for action. Similarly, Putnam (*et al* 1994, 2000) presents the notion that social capital is central to civic engagement and in creating a more cohesive society. The study of voluntary associations and their link to civic engagement has primarily focused on modes of social capital (shared values, collaboration, mutual trust, etc.) developed through participation in such organizations. While being an important aspect in the relationship between immigrants and organizations, the emphasis on social capital overlooks “processual questions about the specific social contexts in which knowledge and social practice, particularly the practice of civic engagement are developed,” (Brettell and Reed-Danahay 2008b: 198).



The various writings on social capital intersect with ideas first put forth with anthropological predecessors such as Emile Durkheim and Victor Turner. First Durkheim's notions of mechanical and organic solidarity provide us with one model of what holds individuals together in institutions. Mechanical solidarity operates as a cohesive force in smaller scale societies and is based on shared beliefs, sentiments, and ways of life. Organic solidarity functions in larger, more complex societies to integrate society through interdependence, and is arranged around economic and political organizations (Durkheim 1997 [1883]). Another formulation of cohesiveness is the notion of *communitas*, first conceived by Victor Turner (1969). *Communitas* denotes intense feelings of social togetherness, equality, and solidarity, and to an extent standing outside of the normal structure of society. Social capital, organic solidarity, and *communitas* are interrelated theoretical constructions about how and why groups of people function together, and aid in understanding the dynamic between individuals and voluntary associations.

With few outlets for expression for Iranian-American immigrant life in the public sphere, these ethnically-based voluntary associations in San Diego are the most self-conscious and obvious way of displaying *communitas*. Therefore these voluntary organizations, local and online, are more than the "symbolic construction of community" (Cohen 1985). Instead they are the "hyper conscious" construction of community because they move beyond Kerri's (1976) definition of a group maintained by members "pursuing a common interest." What these organizations offer is a reification of what it means to be Iranian outside of Iran. The fact that members come together to maintain and display their Iranian-ness is only part of the answer, they also offer members a forum to engage

with what it means to be both part of and separate from political community. That political community simultaneously references the U.S. and Iran.

### ***Research Questions and Hypotheses***

Using “political talk” as a construct for political ideology and participation, where and how does it manifest in the lives of Iranian Americans? This research proposes to examine the sites, locations, and moments where it appears within the public sphere. Iranian voluntary associations proved to be a vehicle to both recruit informants and understand these organizations from the perspective of insiders. I extend the definition of Iranian voluntary association to encompass online and virtual communities of Iranians. How are these Iranian voluntary associations’ settings (acting as forums) and sources (acting as instigators) for political talk? Are they “vehicles of change” as Anderson (1971) asserts, or rather are they “motors of change?”

Because these organizations are composed of individuals, I selected informants who could guide me through the structure and landscape of political talk. The goal of the interviews was to understand how such persons narrate the meanings of their political or civic action and the role it plays in the larger trajectory of their lives, especially within the context of their migration experience. Using a life course perspective, another aim was to understand their relationship to voluntary associations and develop a list of political and civic action in which Iranian immigrants participate. I used virtual ethnography to complement the conventional ethnography in order to analyze the nature of political discourse among Iranian communities online and to determine if there is a relationship between online and offline political discourse. If so, what are the characteristics of this connection?

Based on preliminary fieldwork I hypothesized that factors such as age at migration, length of time in U.S., particular migration experience, and interactions with home country political events through the medium of the public sphere impact the meaning and significance of political activity. I reasoned that perhaps the political discourse taking place within and through local voluntary associations would mirror that taking place online.

This hypothesis, I expected, would lead me to understanding the process of politicization among immigrants. I further hypothesized that structural factors such as political history in the homeland, local host country interactions, and on-going interactions with home country through the public sphere would impact this process.

### ***Significance***

Through voluntary associations, we can uncover the private and symbolically complex notions of community, politics, identity, belonging and citizenship among Iranian immigrants. Voluntary associations and civic culture comprise major institutions within public life, and the study of the anthropology of modernization and globalization (e.g. Appadurai 1996) is increasing. The concept of voluntary associations in the context of civic engagement dovetails nicely with the still-emerging scholarship on online communities and cyber cultures (Escobar 1994, Boellstroff 2008, Miller and Slater 2000, Freidenberg 2011).

By applying “voluntary associations” to specific online communities in this research, it comprises a new extension of the term relevant to this current media age. Further, this research considers specific diaspora or immigrant-based online communities together with material ethnic grassroots organizations. This provides a novel, more

thorough way to examine sites of immigrant political discourse so that we get a better understanding of immigrant political agency. The study also advances anthropological methodology by combining virtual ethnography (in order to understand political discourse online) with conventional ethnography (in order to understand political agency among the local population).

This research details how the civic and political spheres are linked through immigrant voluntary organizations, as well as processes of politicization. By looking at how one particular population of Iranian immigrants respond to homeland crises and participate in politics and civic culture, this study provides a retro-and prospective analysis of how diasporic citizens engage in social/political movements outside the territories of the borders of their nation-state and homeland, especially in instances when diplomatic relations between home and host prevent most forms of transnational political participation, such as supporting oppositional movements in home country. This kind of knowledge has an impact on development policy and diplomacy between nations.

This is a critical moment for the formation of a distinctly Iranian-American identity within American civic and popular culture as a number of Iranians are obtaining a more prominent public profile. We see this in the emergence of advocacy groups, political action committees, and other voluntary organizations across the U.S. For the last several years, the national organization Public Affairs Association of Iranian Americans (PAAIA) has convened a series of programs in cities all over the U.S. called Passing the Torch which highlight Iranian-American notable achievers. More important is its advocacy work. PAAIA has organized town hall meetings with the Department of State related to visas for Iranian students, issued press releases related to a recent case of

discrimination by Apple, and furthered the conversation about the effect of sanctions and internet restrictions and access to media in Iran.

There is an Iranian-American mayor of Falls Church, Virginia named Nader Baroukh. In Carlsbad, CA an Iranian-American woman won a city council seat, and is the first Iranian American to hold political office in San Diego. In November 2012 in Washington State, Cyrus Habib became the first Iranian American elected to state legislature. There are also Iranian comedians like Maz Jobrani and Nasim Pedrad on network and cable television and others on popular shows such as Saturday Night Live. Iranians, such as Reza Aslan, and Azar Nafisi (author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*), both prominent writers and scholars, act as commentators and pundits on Iranian issues in popular media. In March 2009 the Persian Cultural Center in San Diego initiated an online petition requesting that Nowruz be officially recognized by the United Nations and its date be commemorated in the calendars of all UN member organizations. The UN General Assembly passed this resolution on February 23, 2010 recognizing the International Day of Nowruz (March 21), as a spring festival of Persian origin. Both Houses of Congress formally passed a resolution recognizing Nowruz, the Persian New Year, in March 2010 after the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA) introduced the initiative to a Congressman from California's 15<sup>th</sup> District. For the 2010 U.S. Census, for the first time ever a coalition of over 47 non-profit Iranian American organizations came together in an effort called "Iranians Count 2010 Census Coalition" with the idea of ensuring maximum participation to get a more accurate account of Iranians in the U.S. (Hosseini 2012).

### ***Scope and Limitations***

This research project offers an insider's and experience-based look at a group of active members of an immigrant population who participate in one of the Iranian voluntary organizations in San Diego. To an extent, this project is about Iranian-American civic and political identity, but more about how these informants articulate and narrate ideas about political ideology, social values, and their own place in American society, as well as how they live out those values and ideologies through their everyday participation in the political and civic culture of the United States, more specifically in the political and civic culture of a specific locality—San Diego, California.

To say what this study is not—it is not about how they maintain and celebrate Iranian-ness in the midst of changing forces and changing times in Southern California but how they frame their current politics and civic participation in the context of their attitudes and experiences with the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). But, as I argue later, how they articulate to Iran also says something about how they integrate into the U.S. In a sense the IRI is continually positioned as the silent other, the big bad wolf that took their lives away and changed everything for them forever. Speaking un-metaphorically, the IRI in reality is the “fixed variable” or the “control” in this study because as it will become clear, though they may be of different political stripes, Iranians outside of Iran are unequivocally anti-regime.

## ***Organization of the Chapters***

In this chapter, I discussed the challenges and opportunities that presented themselves throughout preliminary fieldwork in San Diego during which the research question and design underwent further modification. This dissertation focuses on Iranian immigrant political agency using voluntary associations as the vehicle to understand political and civic practice. I set up my theoretical approach and significance, and how this research contributes to anthropological theory in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 reviews the literature pertaining to Iranian Americans in the social sciences literature, providing a demographic profile of Iranians in the U.S. and characteristics of the population in Southern California. Chapter 2 also provides an overview of the relevant literature and the conceptual frameworks that group the foreign born either as immigrant or diasporans. It posits that while we can understand Iranian migrants through the lens of immigration studies, the perspective of diaspora studies provides us a more refined understanding of their political and civic action. It reviews the current literature on immigrant politics and political transnationalism from political science, anthropology and sociology. It considers how diasporas engage with the notion of the public sphere in the realm of cyberspace, and the ways in which discourse in cyberspace among diasporas offer new forms of community at the same time challenging more established narratives. Chapter 3 describes the methods employed (participant observation, life histories and virtual ethnography being among them) and how those research methods helped address the research questions, as well as describing the research setting of San Diego and particular social media communities on the Internet. I also cover issues related to my own ethnographic engagement, power and authority, and the ethical considerations that arise when merging

conventional and virtual ethnography. Chapter 4 gives the background and migration story of each of the informants and uncovers major themes related to major life course events that spurred movement, (in)abilities to return to homeland, aspects of identity, and senses of belonging and solidarity to different people, groups, causes and how this motivates political and civic action. Chapter 5 explores the political as it intersects with the personal, examining dominant tropes in informants' discourses about political/civic participation. This chapter also provides a typology of political action/behavior, the process of politicization among Iranian Americans, as well the role of voluntary ethnic-based organizations in fomenting an emerging Iranian immigrant civil society, and the potential of immigrant political agency and organizations as the vehicle for "learning" about democracy. The final chapter, Chapter 6, affords the opportunity to discuss interpretations of the data in light of methodology, and to sum up the ways this thesis addressed research questions and contributed to the field of immigration studies and anthropological methodology, and reflect on future research prospects.



## Chapter 2 Background and Literature Review

In this chapter I bring together the various bodies of scholarship that have informed my study. The strategy here is to juxtapose the disparate strands of scholarship and make them work together as applied to the case of Iranian Americans and their participation in political and civic structures. In the first section, called “Iranian Migration and Diaspora,” I lay out the characteristics of the population in question in this research project. I provide a brief history of Iranians’ migration history, their demographic profile in the U.S., then discuss what is known about them through the Iranian Studies literature. The overall point of this section is to relate major social-science knowledge<sup>15</sup> about the population and orient the reader to current issues and contexts. I conclude with a consideration of how communities mark and symbolize boundaries especially amidst social change. This references the point made in Chapter 1 about how Iranian ethnic grassroots based organizations are hyper-conscious constructions of community, and that community is also constructed through online diaspora groups.

In the second section, “Diaspora or Immigrants?,” I consider the two separate but interrelated streams of research with regards to persons displaced from their country of origin: writings that use the term “diaspora” versus research that studies immigrants to posit that both terms are needed for understanding the case of Iranian Americans. An exhaustive literature is already in place about this debate and my aim is not to cover it all but to highlight what each field offers with respect to understanding Iranian immigrants’ political agency.

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<sup>15</sup> I use “social science” because relevant sources about the Iranian immigrant population draw from anthropology, sociology, demography, media studies, and cultural studies.

“Following the person” as Marcus (1995) advocates, revealed two arenas of political talk among Iranian migrants: formal organizations and online communities. These last two sections parallel the model I proposed in Chapter 1 which broadly follows Iranian political talk or discourse in the public sphere, outside of the realm of meyhmoon (social gatherings with friends and family in the private sphere). I defined public sphere in terms of Fraser’s (1990) re-articulation of Habermasian notions of the public sphere. For my study, “Public sphere” lumps together political talk and political action together with engagement with voluntary associations online and offline. Therefore the third section, called “Immigrant Political Participation and Political Transnationalism” discusses the literature on immigrant civic/political engagement through formal mechanisms. Because anthropology’s contribution to the topic of immigrant political agency is still emerging and the most similarly-oriented sources offer on-the-ground detailed ethnographic case studies (e.g. Reed-Danahay and Brettell 2008) it is difficult to get a systematic view of immigrant politics solely within anthropology. Therefore, my approach with this section has been inter-disciplinary drawing from sociology, political science, and policy research, each offering something valuable to my study. Lastly, the final section “Online Communities and Constructing the Diasporic Public Sphere” delves deeper into newer scholarship related to how immigrants and members of a diaspora use new technologies of communication to construct a diasporic public sphere.

### ***Iranian Migration and Diaspora***

The first wave of migration from Iran to the U.S., which started in the mid-1950s, primarily consisted of college students (Hakimzadeh and Dixon 2006). As expected, Iran’s more favorable geo-political relationship with the rest of the world as well as U.S.

immigration law at that point in time heavily influenced rates and patterns of migration. This first wave of migration primarily consisted of university students studying abroad to meet the needs of a rapidly industrializing oil-based economy. After 1973, the economic boom and dramatic increase of oil revenues propelled more student emigration to the U.S. From the 1950s to 1978, approximately 34,000 people left Iran (Hakimzadeh and Dixon 2006).

After the revolution in 1978, there was a steady and notable increase in the number of Iranians classified as immigrants, tripling in size in the period of 1978-1986. (Bozorgmehr and Sabagh 1988). Many of these were as a result of converting their status from non-immigrant to legal immigrant.<sup>16</sup> The 1979-1980 Islamic revolution and its aftermath was the main factor that precipitated the growth of the Iranian diaspora worldwide, mostly as exiles and political refugees in countries of settlement (Bozorgmehr 1998).

The post-revolution exodus has been referred to as the second wave of migration. In 1990, 637,500 Iranians were enumerated in official national censuses of the following ten countries: U.S., Canada, West Germany, Sweden, Great Britain, France, Norway, Australia, Israel, and Japan. The U.S. had nearly half (45%) of those Iranians living abroad (Bozorgmehr 1998). From 1980 to 2004, more than one out of every four Iranian immigrants was a refugee or asylee (Hakimzadeh and Dixon 2006), which were disproportionately members of religious and ethnic minorities, such as the Bahá'ís, Jews, Armenians, and Assyrians. Also included in this second wave were young men who fled military service and the Iran-Iraq war, followed by young women and families who came

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<sup>16</sup> During and after the hostage crisis, the closure of the U.S. Embassy made it impossible to obtain a U.S. visa in Iran meaning that people had to travel to another country in order to get a visa (Bozorgmehr and Sabagh 1988).

for educational and political reasons (Hakimzadeh and Dixon 2006). Seventy-five percent (75%) of the current Iranian population in the U.S. entered before 2000 (Hosseini 2012).

In 2000, the Iranian-born U.S. population was 283,000, though the Iranian-American community claims the number is much larger than the Census Bureau figure suggests (Hakimzadeh and Dixon 2006). Census 2010 does not ask about country of origin (Dr. Mehdi Bozorgmehr, personal communication)<sup>17</sup>. The 2009 American Community survey enumerates 470,000 people claiming Iranian ancestry, with 57% of them in the West (U.S. Census Bureau 2009).<sup>18</sup>

### **Demographic Profile: Iranians in the U.S.**

Analyses of immigrant experiences tend to focus on low wage and working class immigrants, and far less on the experiences of middle class migrants (Freidenberg, personal communication). Iranian immigrants constitute a substantively different population within immigration research. One reason is that unlike Asians and Latin Americans, the passage of the 1965 Immigration Reform Act had little effect on Iranians emigrating to the U.S.<sup>19</sup> Rather it was the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79 and its aftermath that was the contributing factor for Iranian emigration (Bozorgmehr 1998).

Another reason that Iranian immigrants differ from other recently-arrived groups is that, as a whole, they are highly educated, professional and entrepreneurial (Amanat 1993). This makes them more economically assimilated as compared to other recent immigrant groups. Data taken the American Community Survey from 2008-2010 show

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<sup>17</sup> This information is released through the American Community Survey.

<sup>18</sup> It is difficult to get an accurate number of Iranians living in the United States. Even the Census Bureau acknowledges that the number of Iranian Americans has historically been under-represented in Census data (Hosseini 2012).

<sup>19</sup> The post-1965 large-scale migration of people from Asia and Latin America into the U.S. was due in part to new immigration legislation.

that 59% of Iranians have a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 28% of the general population, and 30% have a Master's degree or higher, versus 10% of the general population. Further, the median household income is \$68,000 versus \$51,000 for general population (Hosseini 2012). According to the 2000 Census, more than half (51.8%) of the Iranian immigrant population were employed in management, professional, and related occupations and the self-employment rate of Iranian foreign born (11.6%) was almost double the rate for the total foreign born population (Hakimzadeh and Dixon 2006). Iranian immigrants have higher rates of naturalization (60.7%) as compared to other foreign born populations. Eighty-four percent of Iranians describe themselves as knowing English well or very-well, yet many still speak their mother tongue at home (Bozorgmehr and Sabagh 1988).

As compared to other new immigrant groups, research on Iranian immigrants is still lacking. Bozorgmehr (1998) provides a very general survey of the literature and groups the research conducted thus far around the following categories: immigrants vs. exiles, ethnicity and ethnic identity, economic adaptation, gender, assimilation, and the 1.5 and second generations (though he contends that research in the last category is sorely lacking).

Finally, even given their high rates of economic and educational integration into U.S. society, language and cultural preservation are important. Iranians have slightly higher rates of speaking a language other than English at home (92.1%) than the total foreign born (83%) (Hakimzadeh and Dixon 2006). Iranian immigrants exhibit a high degree of secularization: 68% of respondents to a 2005 online survey administered by the Iranian Studies Group at MIT noted that they did not practice any religion.

The metropolitan areas with the most Iranian immigrants are, respectively: Los Angeles–Riverside-Orange County (41%), San Francisco-Oakland-San Jose (10%), New York City (8%), and Washington, DC-Baltimore (7%), according to the 2000 Census. The next three largest destinations are San Diego (7,675), Dallas (6,376) and Houston (6,287) (Hakimzadeh and Dixon 2006).

### **Iranian Studies in Diaspora**

Developed in the vein of area studies and orientalism (Dabashi 2004), Iranian Studies is an interdisciplinary field concerned with the literature, history, art and culture of Iranian people<sup>20</sup>. Of course it is a much older field than the study of Iranian immigrants. Much of the available literature about or on Iranians in the United States is informed by a cultural studies and literary criticism perspective, especially with the explosion of genres of memoir and autobiography by Iranians in the diaspora. Far fewer resources exist in the social sciences literature. One reason, as pointed out by Higgins (2004), could be because the relative low status of studying social sciences among Iranian Americans. Primarily carried out by Iranian sociologists living in the U.S., the focus in the related social sciences literature has been on the general characteristics of the population, especially in high-density population centers like Los Angeles and Washington D.C.

With reference to the available scholarship on the Iranian immigrant population, Higgins (2004) conducted a meta-analysis of the available literature. Among 83 English-language publications by 53 authors, only 15 were carried out by anthropologists. Methods employed typically involved a combination of participant observation,

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<sup>20</sup> Iranian Studies actually began in Iran with the study of Persian literature, then expanded to Europe in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century with the interest in comparative linguistics.

interviews and surveys. Higgins (2004) also details the challenges in conducting fieldwork among this population. Surveys were self-administered and all had response rates below the U.S. Office of Budget and Management contract researchers. Large scale surveys with statistical samples do not exist. Semi-structured interviews were the most popular interview technique, with sample sizes ranging from 8 to 671 (among 10 authors reporting). Only two researchers mention using a tape recorder, and two others mention specifically not using a tape recorder because of their informants' fears that the SAVAK (Iranian secret police) or the CIA was collecting information about them.

While not directly ignoring the political activity and sentiment of Iranian-Americans, the majority of literature about the Iranian immigrant population focuses on identity formation and aspects of hybridized culture that look back toward to Iran. Further, much of the social science studies have relied on surveys, self-administered semi-structured interviews, and the author's knowledge about the community. My study seeks to consider Iranian immigrants' participation in politics and the public sphere, first *throughout* their life course and more holistically considering their interaction with host nation structures and civil society. In what follows here I provide a brief review of the social sciences literature.

Looking at ethnic identity preservation among Iranians in Los Angeles, Bozorgmehr (1997) puts forth the notion of "internal ethnicity" to refer to the presence of ethnic groups within an immigrant group. Through the analysis of survey data of Iranians in Los Angeles, he found that immigrant ethno-religious sub groups who were minority populations in Iran (such as Armenians, Jews and Bahá'ís) were less assimilated and have maintained their ethnicity in the U.S. more than the Iranian Muslim majority.

Bozorgmehr believes that this shows that pre-migration ethnicity is an important factor in post-migration ethnicity. Others like Naficy (1993) believe that shared Persian language makes an Iranian national identity prevail over sub-ethnic affiliations. Sabagh and Bozorgmehr (1994) developed a link between religiosity and ethnicity to explain the high rates of secularization among Iranian Muslims. The secularism of Iranian Muslims in Los Angeles is attributed to the marked selectivity in their urban origin, high social class, exile status and secularism in Iran before migration.

Mobasher (2006) examines the impact of political events, American media and the anti-Iranian discourse on the formation of ethnic identity, among Iranian immigrants, and attempts to explain why religious (Islamic) and national identities have been veiled and subsumed by the emergence of Persian identity by both secular and religious Iranian immigrants to the U.S. Mobasher calls this diminishing religiosity and the veiling of national identity as "ethnic switching." With the 1978 Iranian Revolution and the 1979 hostage crisis and subsequent Iran-Iraq war, the 1980s were a tense time period for Iranian immigrants. Outrage and frustration about the hostage crisis by native-born Americans, anti-Iranian demonstrations and a racist/prejudice popular discourse against Iranians, coupled with increased levels of surveillance (for example, Iranians were required to register with INS) meant that Iranians in the U.S. perceived that a veritable "mini-war" was being waged against them.

Mobasher (2006) asserts that the Iranian community "in exile" lacks a unified sense of national identity, and this is most evidenced by the differing self-identifying labels: Iranians, Persians, Iranian American, Persian American, etc. These labels are situational and contextual. Nationalists are proud to be affiliated with Persian heritage but are



ashamed to be identified with Iranian national government. The glorification and promotion of elements of Persian culture and folkways in public becomes a central feature of Iranian identity. There are other Iranians who identify themselves through a combination of Islamic (religious) and cultural (Persian) features. The self-identification of many Iranians as Persians indicates a symbolic resistance against the Islamic Republic and dominance of Islamic ideology in Iran. In glorifying such distinctly Persian and pre-Islamic celebrations as *Nowruz*, *Chaharshanbeh Soori*, and *Sizdeh Bidar* as described earlier and overall emphasizing the cultural significance of Persian heritage, community organizers and political activists find an opportunity to construct a political community, express their grievances, and mobilize for collective action against the Iranian government," (Mobasher 2006: 114).

Additionally Mostofi (2003) describes dual aspects in the formation of an Iranian-American identity: American notions of freedom and liberty, plus Iranian cultural traditions and concepts of the family. Iranians tend to define being American as a culture of civic nationalism. Further certain ideals of Western democracy and political rhetoric are not new for Iranian immigrants, having been part of the Iranian psyche since World War II (Mostofi 2003), and large-scale westernization of Iranian culture goes back to at least the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Kelley 1993), especially through education. A relic of this influence can be found in the Persian colloquial expression for “thank you” which is *mersi*, an adaptation of the French word expressing thanks. Iranian-Americans, Mostofi (2003) argues, are successful at constructing a hybrid identity because they keep important aspects of their Iranian identity in the private realm of the home among family and friends while publicly embracing perceived American civic culture and values.

Naficy (1998) maps what he terms “Iranian exile culture” in Los Angeles and shows how television and other kinds of cultural products and popular social practices transform an exile community into an ethnicity (Behdad 1996). As Naficy (1993) suggested, exile ethnic pop subcultures have a dual function of guiding exile communities to make a transition from liminality to incorporation into the host culture and providing a means for the preservation of ethnic culture and the expression of resistive, subversive, and oppositional ideas. As an important ideological tool against the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iranian television and radio programs produced in Los Angeles have been the chief purveyors of the non-Islamic Iranian national identity. With the exception of a few, nearly all the Iranian television programs have been dominated by secular anti-Khomeini royalists who support a form of constitutional monarchy (Naficy 1998). Therefore, discussions about the social and political conditions of Iran, treatment of political dissidents, and loss of national dignity and international respect under the Islamic government have been a central feature of the Iranian media in exile.

According to Naficy (1993:7), as part of constructing this form of national identity in diaspora, images of a pre-Islamic or prerevolutionary Iran were frozen into icons and fetishes that were repeatedly circulated in television program titles and logos, in the music video images, and in the programs themselves. As Naficy (1993) maintains, to an extent this ideology and “manufactured” Iranian community (for instance promoting the celebration of holidays and mannerisms of culture under the Pahlavi regime<sup>21</sup>) supported by Iranian exile television in Los Angeles glosses over the

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<sup>21</sup> See Appendix 1 for historical chronology of Iran. The Pahlavi regime refers to the ruling monarchy (Reza Khan and son Reza Shah) before the Iranian Revolution of 1979).

heterogeneity of Iranian immigrants in the U.S. coming from different ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds (Naficy 1993, Mostofi 2003).

The political demonstration is an important part of the Iranian social landscape in Los Angeles (Kelley 1993), and has been used by Iranian immigrants to protest the regime, or advocate for their particular political orientation since at least since the 1970s. Therefore expressing political agency as an Iranian immigrant is not necessarily a new phenomenon.

In terms of organizational life, Bozorgmehr (1998) contends that the presence of associations among Iranian immigrants is negligible as compared to other immigrant groups. Even less important is the role that ethnic associations and voluntary organizations play in the lives of Iranians. Compared to other new immigrant groups, Iranians have very few ethnic associations or organizations. The main explanation for this pattern is cultural: voluntary associations were uncommon in Iran (Bozorgmehr 1998:24).

However this is not something that has been borne out in my study. As elaborated in the Preface, conversations and debates about politics abound in the private sphere. While not necessarily functioning as mutual aid associations that have been common with other immigrant groups in history, Iranian immigrants in the U.S. have organized associations to preserve and present Persian<sup>22</sup> expressive culture in areas of settlement throughout the U.S.

### **Iranians in Southern California**

The southern California region has the highest concentration of Iranians outside of Iran (Bozorgmehr 1998). San Diego represents an important field site within southern California, with L.A. and Orange County also having large numbers of Iranian residents.

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<sup>22</sup> Here, distinguishing self-consciously Persian expressive culture that is the dominant form presented and displayed, as opposed to other ethnic groups in Iran.

Southern California Iranians are more ethnically, religiously and economically homogenous than other settlements in the U.S. As products of the Pahlavi-era in Iran, they represent the middle to upper-middle class professionals who were already inclined to western influence and belonged to Iran's predominantly secular middle class. They were successful in importing their wealth, education and experience to the U.S. (Mostofi 2003). Therefore in terms of "studying up" (Nader 1972) researching Iranian immigrants in southern California means looking at an example of the migration of elites, upholding values like Westernization secularization, urbanization and modernization.

Partly because of their financial, occupational, and educational capital, Iranians in Southern California have not formed a single ethnic residential enclave (Naficy 1993:28). However there is an ethnic pattern to their dispersal in the Los Angeles area: Bahá'ís in Santa Monica/West Los Angeles; Muslims in Santa Monica/Palms; Armenians in Glendale, and Jews in Westwood and Beverly Hills (Bozorgmehr 1992: 168-169 cited in Naficy 1993:28). Nonetheless, the idea of Iranian identity, nation and nationalism prevails against this sub-ethnic dispersal. Naficy (1993) argues that the lack of a single dominant religion and residential concentration as markers of ethnicity amplifies the significance of other factors of ethnicity, such as the shared Persian language (Farsi) transcending all internal ethnic boundaries. The fact that popular culture (television, radio, popular press) disseminated almost entirely in Farsi helps create an imaginary Iranian national identity for all Iranians, regardless of their ethnic/linguistic/religious affiliation (Naficy 1993).

In conclusion, we know historically that Iran as imagined nation amalgamates abundant cultural and linguistic diversity (Dabashi 2004). For example, only 51 percent

of the Iranian population belongs to the Persian speaking community. The rest are Azeris, Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, Baluch, Armenians, Zoroastrians, Bahá'ís, Jews, and a myriad of others. It is noteworthy that sub-national ethnicity is recognized among Iranian immigrants in places like Los Angeles where there is high enough residential concentration. As others such as Mobasher (2006) have noted and through my own observations, both the expression of a specifically Persian cultural heritage, *and* the prevalence of Farsi language popular culture in the form of movies, radio, and television. as Naficy (1993) has shown, sub-ethnic distinctions (e.g. Isfahanis, Rashtis, Azaris, Kurds, Lors, Baluchis, Turkic, as well as Jewish), and practices are overlooked and re-framed for the construction of a unified Iranian identity in diaspora.

I see the construction of a unified Iranian identity in diaspora as a two-prong process. First boundaries between Iranians and non-Iranians become more marked. As an example: Adnan, one of my informants and an active community organizer pointed out as evidence in his “all the pretty stuff” comment that local voluntary associations host a public event for Mehregan, a traditional Zoroastrian celebration for the fall equinox, that is not even really celebrated in Iran anymore. In speaking about boundaries, symbols, and social change among community, especially among sub-national boundaries, Cohen (1985) writes,

Indeed, the greater the pressure on communities to modify their structural forms to comply more with those elsewhere, the more they are inclined to reassert their boundaries *symbolically* [emphasis in original] by imbuing these modified forms with meaning and significance which belies their appearance. In other words, as the *structural* [emphasis in original] bases of boundary become blurred, so the symbolic bases are strengthened through ‘flourishes and decorations’, ‘aesthetic frills’ and so forth (44).

Secondly, any inherent complexity is reduced symbolically. In speaking of the conceptualization and symbolization of community boundaries, Cohen (1985) distinguishes between “private” and “public” faces of community. The latter is the material for comedians and tabloid journalism where “internal variety disappears or coalesces into a simple statement” (74), whereas the private mode makes room for complexity and differentiation.

The boundary thus symbolizes the community to its members in two quite different ways: it is the sense they have of its perception by people on the other side—the public face and ‘typical’ mode—and it is their sense of the community as refracted through all the complexities of their lives and experience—the private face and idiosyncratic mode....For it is here that we encounter people thinking about and symbolizing their community,” (74-75).

Therefore, Persian cultural heritage festivals and celebrations constitute the public face and symbolically simple boundary of the Iranian immigrant community in San Diego. I argue that in looking to conspicuous construction of community boundaries *through* virtual diasporas online and through local ethnic grassroots bases organizations, we can uncover the private and symbolically complex notions of community, politics, identity and belonging. In the next section, I argue that while we know Iranians through the lens of immigration studies, we can understand their political and civic action better through the perspective of diaspora studies. Both are needed to contextualize immigrant political civic action through the life course.

### ***Diaspora or Immigrants?***

My use of the terms “diaspora” and “immigrants” in the case of Iranians is a deliberate and strategic choice. At times, immigrant is appropriate because that is how they have been covered in the social science literature, and my dissertation research aims to insert itself into the larger scholarship about middle class/professional migrants and

immigrant political agency. Further, the growing literature on modes of transnationalism (Glick Schiller, Basch, Blanc 1995; Levitt and Jaworsky 2007), especially political transnationalism is oriented toward the term immigrant.

At other times, diaspora is more appropriate, for two primary reasons. The first reason is a semantic one. Diasporas, defined as dispersed populations across the globe, are less bound ideologically to the notion of the nation-state. In other words, when speaking of Iranian immigrants, we must ask to which country did they immigrate? When speaking of the Iranian diaspora, we think of a dispersed population of Iranians residing in many countries.

Secondly studies of immigrants oftentimes rely on the worn-out model of linear integration, acculturation, and assimilation where immigrants move from one culture into another (Fortier 2000). Iranians may be economically integrated but have high rates of Farsi language maintenance in the home for example (Hakimzadeh and Dixon 2006). Further, the term “diaspora” signals agency on the part of the displaced individual, while “immigrant” is a label often put on populations by others. Immigrants are seen as acquiescing to the demands of an industrial society rather than actively engaging in shaping and negotiating their immediate circumstances to fit their requirements (Fortier 2000).

Definitions and uses of the term diaspora by scholars such as Cohen (1997), Safran (1991), and Hall (1990) are relevant to the Iranian case. Cohen (1997) finds in a survey of various diasporas through space and time that they share some important attributes: a sense of collectivity, group consciousness, solidarity, with a specific relationship to homeland. Safran (1991) cites the presence of a “diaspora consciousness”

characterized by five components; including a belief that they will never fully be accepted into the host society and a desire to eventually return to their ancestral home. Coming out of a cultural studies framework, Hall (1990) explores issues of representation and identity and the two positions of cultural identity. The first has to do with a shared collective cultural used for mobilization and solidarity projects and important to the production and rediscovery of these essential identities. The second position of cultural identity recognizes the differences and disjuncture, and speaks to the traumatic nature of the colonial experience on people of color. The historical trajectory of those histories has material and symbolic effects on these cultural identities. The diasporic experience and identity is not essentialized or pure but springs forth from heterogeneity, hybridity, and constant reproduction. Clifford (1994) sees the usage of diaspora as a “resistance to assimilations” and signifier of “political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement,” (307).

All of these ideas about what “diaspora” offers have considerable utility for this study in terms of thinking about how this notion carries: 1) certain oppositional identities which are in themselves heterogeneous and hybrid, and 2) the potential for creating collectivities and mobilizing. These characteristics speak to a specific psychological stance associated with diaspora as being a force for new cultural expression. This “constructivist” approach to diaspora (Adamson 2002) as an imagined community (Anderson 1983) gets at internally constructed worlds and implies the possibility of agency and cultural production.

However, “diaspora” can also be problematic in its over-use and conflation. While Clifford (1994) lays out the characteristics and typology of both historical and



contemporary usages of the term diaspora as a theoretical concept, he warns against the universalization of diaspora to all immigrant groups. Diaspora is a heuristic device and not a descriptive concept (Gilroy 1993 in Fortier 2000), yet the usage of the term proliferates in tandem with processes of globalization (Clifford 1994). Olwig (2003) finds that the focus on identity issues in relation to migrants' places of origin has led to a certain merging of the notion of transnationalism and diaspora so that migrants are sometimes referred to as constituting a diaspora. Vertovec (1999) has defined social formations that span borders as "ethnic diasporas." The editor of the journal *Diaspora*, Khachig Tölölyan (1996), expressing concern over the widespread use of the term diaspora by intellectuals, notes that "Diasporic identity has become an occasion for the celebration of multiplicity and mobility—and a figure of our discontent with our being in a world still dominated by nation-states" (1996:28 quoted in Olwig 2003) which may be more of an intellectual and personal project infused with intentions related to the political identity of particular arenas rather than an analysis of actual sociocultural practices of transmigrant actors (Olwig 2003). Further, the close association between identity issues and transnationalism<sup>23</sup> has had negative repercussions on the range of cultural phenomena considered that Appadurai (1996) has termed "marked culture" and left unexamined the much wider range of unmarked culture on which marked culture draws. Marked culture in this context is defined as migrants' assertion of their national identities (Olwig 2003). Gabriel Sheffer, a political scientist, describes three main criteria to define a diaspora: a common ethnic identity, internal organization, and third, significant contact with homeland (Sheffer 1993 cited in Dorai 2002).

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<sup>23</sup> Olwig (2003) finds in Basch et al (1994) that transnational sociocultural systems are described as feeding, and feeding upon, identity politics in the receiving country.

Transnational” and “diaspora” also become conflated, with unnecessary binaries being drawn between the two. Portes et al (1999) distinguishes transnational communities from diasporas because diaspora’s connections to homeland are largely symbolic while for the latter the connections are real. I have a problem with this distinction for Iranians in the diaspora since they comprise a “mixed” community of those truly in exile and those that make regular return visits. In either case, significant and regular contact with homeland is maintained (Mostofi 2003). Sometimes a diaspora community can become transnational. In the Palestinian case Dorai (2002) distinguishes between elite members of a diaspora and others, and describes the emergence of a Palestinian transnational community via the elite who are now able to maintain “real and physical” contact through travel, the formation of transnational businesses, or economic investment in Palestine (for example in the town of Ramallah).

According to Glick Schiller (1999) transmigrants differ significantly from people with a diasporic tradition. The distinguishing factor seems to be the nation-state. Transmigrants claim and can be claimed by two or more nation-states into which they are incorporated as social actors. Diasporas on the other hand attribute their common identity, cultural beliefs and practices, language or religion to “myths of a common ancestry” and whose common sense of heritage is not linked to a contemporary state.

Thus both the terms diaspora and immigrant are useful for the purposes of this study and will be deployed strategically as needed. As far as how Iranians self-refer, it differs by individual, circumstances of migration and context of discussion. For instance, immediately after the Revolution, Iranian popular press in the diaspora called its community “a community in exile” (*jam’e-ye dar tab’id*). As the migration status

changed for many to immigrant, the term used in the popular press also shifted to “an immigrant community” (*jam’e-ye mohajer*) (Naficy 1993: 28). The Iranian Studies literature alternatively uses the terms immigrant, diaspora and exile. Iranian websites serving the community outside of Iran use the term diaspora. On an organizational level, especially when vouching for recognition in the American political and civic landscape, Iranian organizations will use the term immigrant. The effort to get Iranians to participate in the 2010 U.S. Census, called “Iranians Count,” was coordinated between forty-seven different Iranian non-profit organizations, including the Persian Cultural Center in San Diego, called on Iranian’s ethnic identity in relation to other ethnic groups in the U.S. For this study, my goal was not to determine which category informants belonged to, but to examine the whole range of politically- and civically-oriented behaviors that informants undertook.

My aim in the next section is to frame Iranian migrant political and civic discourse and action within the relevant literature on immigrant politics.

### ***Immigrant Political Participation/ Political Transnationalism***

The literature on transnationalism (Basch et al 1994, Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001, Laguerre 1998, Ostergaard-Nielsen 2003) has shown that contemporary immigrants can and choose to be engaged politically in more than one country. Immigrant involvement in politics and transnational social movements has far-reaching implications for home and host nation-states (Adamson 2002, Lyons and Mandaville 2008, Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008). With events such as political unrest in Paris around national identity in fall 2005, the London bombings in July 2005, and the post-9/11 context of the U.S. (creation of the Office of Homeland Security, immigration

reform debates, and granting amnesty, etc.), the political engagement and political incorporation of immigrants has become an important topic of political discourse.

Looking beyond the economic impact of remittances and the effects of “brain drain” on homeland countries, diasporas<sup>24</sup> are important actors in socio-economic development, as well as in peace and conflict in home countries (Brinkerhoff 2008). In most cases, such as in Kerlin (2008) and Orozco (2004), countries of origin directly benefit from emigrants’ involvement in homeland economic development and aid. However, in the case of Iran, the majority of its emigrant population is in opposition to the ruling government, and precluded from participating in homeland development in the conventional ways, such as the development of NGOs, participating in homeland politics, etc.

Research on immigrants’ potential contributions and the nature and characteristics of their political agency remains scarce. Pero and Solomos (2010) identify three factors that explain the reasons for this neglect: methodological nationalism, over-reliance on analyzing electoral behavior as the only way to understand politics, and factors related to a discipline’s development—as is the case with anthropology. Movement across borders and deterritorialization disrupted anthropology’s original view of people as fixed embodiments of culture. In the past, migrants’ mobilizations were too easily explained by either their ethnicity or the class structure they occupied, and this further led to it being a neglected topic within anthropology and sociology (Pero and Solomos 2010),

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<sup>24</sup> Throughout this review I switch between immigrant, diaspora, migrant, etc., as I want to preserve the author’s usage. For instance, Brinkerhoff (2008) and Kerlin (2008) both use “diaspora” in their work, while Orozco (2004) uses “immigrant”, and Pero and Solomos use “migrant.” I have defined the usages of diaspora versus immigrant in the previous section. In general, the term “migrant” is broader than “immigrant” because it includes undocumented workers.

Immigrant political behavior is an inherently multidisciplinary topic. Political science, sociology, and policy studies, as well as anthropology have all made contributions to the study of immigrant involvement in home and host country politics. While offering richly detailed case studies of the border-spanning political and civic activities of particular groups, anthropology however, has been weaker in offering any systematic models of immigrant/transnational political and civic behavior with which to make comparisons, or to move beyond political-economic explanations. Specifically, anthropology is falling behind with respect to the impact of immigrant voluntary associations. Brettell and Reed-Danahay (2008), two anthropologists, affirm this finding and acknowledge that while several European scholars have begun to look at the role of organizations and in political and civic integration of immigrants in Europe, less attention has been given to this subject for post-1965 immigrants in the U.S.

Gabriel Sheffer (1993, 2003) in political science provides a strong foundation for the creation of models with regards to what is termed “diaspora politics.” Firstly, diaspora communities function on five levels in politics: the domestic level in host country, the regional level, the trans-state level, the level of the entire diaspora, and the level of homeland politics. In each of these levels, their work falls into three broad categories: maintenance, defense and promotion (Sheffer 2003: 173-174). In addition, Sheffer (2003) puts forth a developmental model of diasporas, using the development and maintenance of specifically diaspora organizations as the litmus test to assess levels of integration, maturity, and/or ethnic maintenance. Sheffer’s continuum model of diaspora called “phased dynamic processes” helps in understanding how and why a diaspora

community might change through time, based on experiences and circumstances both with homeland and host country.

Also in political science, Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad (2008) examine community organizations in six cities throughout California and find that while immigrant organizations play an important role in the lives of members; their impact is often compromised by political marginalization and a severe lack of resources. Even in areas with high rates of immigrant organizing, policymakers remain unaware of local ethnic organizations. Looking at new immigrant destinations, Andersen (2008) finds that community organizations often serve as the primary vehicle for political incorporation—a role once played by the major political parties. Ostergaard-Nielson (2003) uses migrant organizations as a point of entry to research transnational political practices. In research among Turks and Kurds in Europe, she finds that migrant organizations stand at the nexus of local, national, and international political processes. Yet, in some ways this methodological choice is a “double-edged sword” (779-780) because it may give a biased understanding of the degree of engagement with the migrant group as a whole. In the civic participation and voluntarism literature (e.g. Putnam 2000), contemporary immigrants have received less attention partly because of a lack of data sources (Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008).

The anthropological approach has strongly emphasized the transnational aspect of immigrant politics (e.g. Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc, 1994, Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001, Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). While they highlight the importance of networks, flows, and the simultaneity of transnational action, they have not adequately defined what that political action in host country might entail. Theorizing the significance

of transnational political activities mean and how they impact notions of citizenship, beyond the judicial definition has been one of the outcomes of such research.

Transnationality problematizes the notion of citizenship to stretch it beyond the realms of the nation-state (Laguerre 1998). The “diasporic citizen” (Laguerre 1998) is one way to note the positioning of a subject vis-à-vis the state. Though discussions of the meaning and impacts of diaspora abound (Clifford 1994, Cohen 1991, Safran 1991, Werbner 1998, Braziel and Mannur 2003, Olwig 2003), the anthropological literature does not differentiate between the immigrant and diasporic citizen. In other words, the various terms used in anthropology for a person that has crossed an international border: migrant, immigrant, transnational, diaspora, transmigrant, etc. all have material and symbolic consequences and implications. These labels do not necessarily align with the immigrant experience and cannot account for the myriad structural or process factors that make an individual or community simultaneously an immigrant with an ethnic identity, a member of a diaspora, and a transmigrant engaging in border-spanning activities. Further, immigrants engaging in transnational political activities define the agenda, which can simultaneously be with local, national, transnational, or global structures.

There are a handful of sources that consider the border-spanning political activities of Mexican immigrants, such as the existence of hometown associations that advocate for bi-national political and civic rights, from an ethnographic perspective (Orozco 2004, Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004, Rivera-Salgado 1999, Smith and Bakker 2008). Additionally, Bada, Fox and Selee (2009) have edited a short collection of papers centered on the spring 2006 mass mobilization for comprehensive immigration reform and examined civic participation and civil society formation by Mexican immigrants.

Work by Brettell and Reed-Danahy (2008, 2012) is perhaps the closest to this dissertation research in what they offer. These authors look to issues of political incorporation and civic engagement, issues of naturalization and the rights and duties of legal citizenship, and also at political and civic participation and forms of “participatory citizenship” within the institutional contexts of nation states. However, there is a relative vacuum for research which positions immigrant political behavior along a continuum of effects (local, national and transnational), provides a typology of diaspora/immigrant political activities, and considers immigrant voluntary associations for their organizational possibilities in structuring immigrant civic and political participation.

Immigrant civic and political action and discourse take place in the public sphere. I defined how I will use “public sphere” in Chapter 1. This definition of the public sphere provides a useful model for contrasting the activities which take place within and through organizational life among Iranian Americans, with the political sentiment and debates that take place in private settings. The other site of public political discourse among Iranians in the diaspora takes place through online cyber-communities.

### ***Online Communities and Constructing a Diasporic Public Sphere***

This section covers how definitions of public sphere and diaspora come together in the context of New Media, especially internet communication technologies to create a virtual diasporic public sphere.

Werbner (1998) conceives of a “diasporic public sphere...in which different transnational imaginaries are interpreted and argued over, where aesthetic and moral fables of diaspora are formulated, and political mobilization generated, often in response to global media events...” (11). Werbner goes on further to describe how global media



events have the power to define the focus of diaspora populations and “demand active participation from viewers and generate localised interpretive communities that sometimes evolve into communities of action” (11). Further, diasporas are “communities of co-responsibility” recognizing not simply their loyalty but their existential connection to 'co-diasporans' elsewhere, or in a home country. This sense of co-responsibility is expressed in tangible material gestures of charitable giving and complex forms of political mobilization, "New social movements, including ethnic, religious, and gendered diasporic movements such as the one considered here, both sustain autonomous spaces of public debate and attempt to influence wider public political realms and centres of power,” (Werbner 1998:xx). Werbner’s description of what constitutes a diasporic public sphere seems almost expressly written for the case represented in this research-- how the Iranian diaspora localized in places across the globe and how they responded to June 2009 events in Iran with mass rallies, sometimes on a daily basis, and an explosion of online political activity and news sharing.

Bernal (2005) perceives that diaspora and cyberspace are conceptually linked. First both are forms of displacement. People in diaspora have to construct a social context for themselves that transcends their physical location. Secondly, diaspora and cyberspace are linked through the notion of “community”. New forms of social belonging have arisen from both advances in communication technology and the geographic mobility of populations. Bernal (2005), in her analysis of Eritreans in diaspora and cyberspace, finds that violence and conflict emerges as a central dynamic. Conflict is both destructive and productive of community and identity and the public sphere. Contrasting her analyses with Benedict Anderson’s assertion (1983) that the imagined nation was intertwined with

the medium of the newspaper, Bernal suggests that new media and new conditions of transnational migration and globalization are altering the lived experience of citizenship, community, and nationalism as well as the ways in which these can be collectively imagined. In a similar vein, Rai (1995:53) found through discourse encountered in electronic bulletin boards, that the Indian diaspora is “being written and re-written in the interstitial space.” This represents a veritable “countersphere” as imagined by Fraser (1990) that pluralized subject positions in its heterogeneity. Thompson (2002) sees that New Media use by ethnic minorities challenges the assimilation model and changes the paradigm of an identity with a single nation-state to a fragmented, hybridized spectrum of identities. Online discourse among diaspora members is an “ever-emerging text” where “no one is in control” and there are no grand narratives. In this, it offers more possibilities.

Bernal (2005), Werbner (1998), Rai (1995), and Thompson (2002) all characterize the diasporic public sphere in cyberspace as one marked by argument and contestation. As Graham and Khosravi (2002) found, the explosion of Iranian-themed websites representing a vast array of opinions and insights means that what constitutes and Iranian virtual diaspora in cyberspace is becoming less inaccessible and less public. They also note that, "Some of the political programs found in cyberspace, such as demands for a restored monarchy in Iran or the political programs of the Iranian far left, if implemented, would certainly not lead to liberation and emancipation, but to new forms of repression and constraint," (222).

In the case of dispersed populations, the public sphere is often enacted through the medium of cyberspace because of its ability to link people in disparate locations. But the

public sphere also includes the media. In the case of post-election Iranian responses it becomes impossible to separate out the influence of mainstream and alternative media from how people responded online and offline. Therefore the notion of diasporic public sphere is a useful concept to visualize the flows of information and ideas between different media, and from media to different structures within the public sphere.

This research is based on my argument that the diasporic public sphere is not just about interaction between diaspora members on the Internet, but interaction and engagement with other material structures such as voluntary associations, and the localized receiving community. The public sphere also includes participation and mobilization in “extra-local” structures such as transnational political movements. In the next chapter, I discuss the methods I used in order to understand some of these issues.

## Chapter 3 Methods

### *Introduction*

I have described how my interest in the topic of Iranian immigrant political participation was shaped by preliminary fieldwork observing the Iranian diaspora's reaction to homeland conflict (in this case the fallout from the June 2009 election) and my experiences among Iranians in San Diego. Following what I defined as political talk in all its manifestations became the focus of the research question, and thus is the organizing principle of my methodology. I provided a rationale and theoretical background in Chapters 1 and 2 for using Iranian ethnic grassroots-based organizations<sup>25</sup> to interview informants and understand these entities as coalescing major interests and controlling social life among civically and politically active Iranians. Secondly, I conceived that virtual communities of Iranians together with on-the-ground groups constitute Iranian voluntary associations. A voluntary association is broadly defined as a private group more or less formally organized, joined and maintained by members pursuing a common interest, and usually by means of part-time and unpaid activities (Kerri 1976). To guide me through the landscape of Iranian political and organizational life in San Diego, I decided that informants needed to be politically and civically active individuals involved with one or more of the local voluntary associations, as they would best be able to articulate these ideas.

This research project consisted of using the following methods to learn about my study population: archival research, literature research, ethnography (participant observation, informal interviewing, and life history interviews) and virtual ethnography.

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<sup>25</sup> I use organizations interchangeably with voluntary associations, though organizations refers to “on-the-ground” groups.

The following section describes conventional ethnography, including sampling voluntary associations and individuals and carrying out the life history interviews. In Section 3, I elaborate on the virtual ethnography component of this study, detailing the online communities under consideration and methods used. Section 4 discusses data analysis. In the last two sections, I discuss issues of building trust, and ethics online and offline, as well as questions of ethnographic engagement and authority.

### ***Conventional Ethnography***<sup>26</sup>

Preliminary fieldwork consisting of informal interviewing and participant observation commenced summer 2010 and continuing through summer 2011. I began to collect life history interviews beginning fall 2011 through spring 2012. Early virtual ethnography conducted in the months after June 2009 informed the design of the informal interview guide during preliminary field research, and later during life history data collection. At this stage, virtual ethnography lent broader context to the data collected from conventional ethnography.

### **Choosing Voluntary Associations and Sampling Informants**

As noted elsewhere, San Diego's population of Iranian immigrants mirrors to an extent other localities in the West Coast of the U.S., such as Orange County and Los Angeles, in its homogeneity and the socio-economic and educational status of its Iranian residents. However San Diego represents an easier, more finitely bounded "laboratory," in which there is a conspicuous set of Iranian ethnic organizations from which to gain access to individual informants. These organizations are dominant in the landscape with

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<sup>26</sup> I am using conventional ethnography here as defined by Freidenberg (2011). In this article, she describes the similarities and differences between "conventional ethnography" and "virtual ethnography."

respect to the fact that most local Iranians know about them and their works, even if they themselves do not participate. It is a smaller population compared to Orange County and Los Angeles.

There are no more than four Iranian voluntary associations in San Diego, not including University-based student-led groups. I chose the two most active ones, Persian Cultural Center (PCC) and the Association of Iranian American Professionals (AIAP) on which to concentrate my efforts. I also selected one university student group, Human Rights for Iran, with which I became acquainted during preliminary fieldwork, to provide me with the perspective of 1.5 and second generation Iranians.

All participating individuals are active in local Iranian grassroots voluntary associations. I call them activists, although not all would feel comfortable with that label. The definition of activism as a member of a diaspora was something that I, as a researcher, and they as chosen informants both grappled with. I conceptualize association members as activists because they are passionate about the mission and aims of the local civic /political organizations they are members of, have attended or organized political rallies, post political content on Facebook, sign online petitions, or convene and attend monthly online conferences related to human rights issues in Iran. All of these actions have to do with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Further these individuals are active or sponsors of local civic organizations related to Iranian diaspora community. All informants are local to San Diego. Some are university students whose primary residence is another location in California, but reside in San Diego most of the year. I made an effort to recruit informants virtually, such as the organizers of active Facebook groups with a political leaning, but was unable to locate informants. Given the sensitive nature of

the research question, there is already a great deal of suspicion from getting contacted by a stranger online asking them to answer questions about their politics. Using purposive sampling (Bernard 2006), I selected eight individuals derived from my local networks in San Diego and as a result of participating in local rallies, meetings, events, etc.

Two categories of Iranian immigrants emerged: a) first-generation immigrants that migrated as adults and have been in U.S. 25+ years and arrived just after the revolution; and b) those that migrated as children and constitute the 1.5 or 2<sup>nd</sup> generation. My life history sample consists of each of the above categories, mixed age and gender. Because I wanted to assess not only levels of levels of political and civic engagement during different points in their life, their attitudes about different political ideologies, their relationship to pre- and post-migration experiences, as well as their relationship to other community members, I decided that a life course perspective is the most beneficial to inform research design. Life history is the chosen method to understand the impact of life course events. Conducting a life history to understand political sentiment, ideology and action throughout the life course provides a more global view of these behaviors, rather than focusing on intense moments of mobilization. Through this method, I hoped to be able to develop a typology of the range of political and civic behaviors, among other goals.

### **The Life Course Perspective through Life Histories**

According to Linde (1993), stories narrated through life histories express our sense of self, who we are and how we got that way. We use these stories to show that our lives can be understood as coherent, and to assert or negotiate group membership. These life stories take part in the highest level of social constructions, since they are built on

cultural assumptions about what is expected in a life, what the norms for a successful life are, and what common or special belief systems are necessary to establish coherence. Life history is an oral and discontinuous form of storytelling, consisting of stories which are retold in a variety of forms over a long period of time, and which may be revised and changed as the speaker comes to drop old meanings and add new ones to parts of the life story. Further, the notion of temporality in life histories can be complex, because in recounting the past, it is also reconstructed and often structured around key turning points that shape the narrator of the life story (Coutin 2011).

Life history thus offers the best opportunity to address a research question about political discourse and political/civic action among Iranian migrants. Since there is little comparable research on this topic with this population, there is a need to deeply study and isolate factors and forces. Rather than trying to thoroughly address this question at the community level, a more micro level analysis would be beneficial. For instance, I was able to isolate the interplay of four components that addressed my research question: particular migration experience of individual and aspects of identity; political ideology and concomitant civic/political behavior throughout life; local Iranian organizations; and incidence of homeland conflict (the 1979 Iranian Revolution, or events like the June 2009 Presidential election). The interview guide, included in Appendix 2, addresses all of the above components by asking the informant about their own actions, experiences, feelings, behavior—that is as a *respondent*. At the same time I ask about their observations of other Iranians and the community at large—that is as an *informant* (Levy and Hollan 1998).



The life history approach favors a long-term perspective that connects lived experiences of migration and belonging. In a similar vein, Florian and Znaniecki (1918) with the Chicago School employed life history as written by Polish immigrants to get an overall picture and better understanding of the lives of Polish immigrants in Chicago. How are people accounting for their own engagement in political activity? Because of my method, I can begin to understand how an individual is related to social structures and historical processes. As Lessard, Johnson and Webber (2011) remind us, "...stories are the medium of politics at both the foundational level of creating community and the personal level of identity formation. For narratives take on much of their power, much of their verisimilitude, to the extent that they are, themselves deeply marked by the existing array of assumptions, value systems, practices, institutions, and material conditions," (14). Therefore, narratives related through this method offer a window to understanding informants' prevailing assumptions, values and boundaries.

During preliminary fieldwork, the semi-structured interview was asking informants about political/civic behavior and ideology at two points in time—before and after June 2009. It perhaps gave too much weight to the events surrounding June 2009 as I found with members of the older generation the Iranian Revolution of 1978-1979 was the dominant event in their socio-political life that caused the biggest disjuncture. Further, there was no way of addressing the effect of other significant life experiences, such as migration and secondary education that might alter political/civic behavior. It was assuming a potential causal affect, which would be false and dangerous given the constraints of sampling. With life history as my primary method I am interested in

understanding the interrelationship between various components in a continuum across an individual's life from the person's perspective (Caughey 2006).

Another reason that life history is preferred over other interview methods is because of the demographic characteristics of local Iranians. As mentioned previously, San Diego has a relatively homogenous (with respect to class, sub-national ethnicities, education level, and religion) Iranian immigrant population therefore striving for representativeness across all Iranian immigrants seems inappropriate given this constraint.

Finally, life history presents an opportunity for self-reflexivity. I am embedded within networks of local Iranian immigrant population. I participate in local rallies, political meetings and civic events. I have family members living here in San Diego, and I understand a great deal about the cultural nuances of being Iranian American yet I am still on the fringes given my own tri-cultural background and lack of complete facility in Farsi. I myself follow current events related to the Islamic Republic of Iran. I am a dual citizen. The well-being of my family (parents, siblings, and children) is directly tied to political events in Iran and state of diplomatic relations between Iran and the U.S. A life history approach requires a cultural investigation of self as the researcher (Caughey 2006). I think this is only reasonable and appropriate given my own positioning.

### **Conducting Life Histories**

I conducted life history interviews with eight individuals. This set of eight individuals is mixed gender, mixed generation, and mixed age at migration. Life history interviews took place in two sittings, averaging one to two hours each. Follow up questions, if needed, took place over telephone or skype. Interviews took place in private

homes, coffee shops, organizational offices or libraries. I let the interview informant decide and choose the location of the interview with my only requirement that it be somewhere where we could talk easily, and without too much disturbance from others or background noise for audio recording. I tended to interview males in non-domestic settings. As one male informant pointed out, it was a strange and uncomfortable experience for an unrelated female to ask personal questions about their life and political ideology.

Preliminary interviews over summer 2011 helped me determine that two interviews would be sufficient for both covering the topics I needed to and gaining an understanding of points of conflict, coherence and transformation during that person's life.<sup>27</sup> While these interviews are life histories in that they ask the respondent to narrate, mainly chronologically, the major events of their life, they are *focused* towards the socio-political realm. Questions focused on their socio-political activities, political ideology, relationship to nation-states as well as basic information like family background, education and reason for migrating. As I began to collect interviews I did indeed find that data saturation began to occur during the last part of the second interview in that respondents and I began circle back to themes and topics we had already covered.

The interview guide begins with basic background information, such as early life and childhood, migration experience, religious background, political ideology, education, post-migration experience, life in San Diego such as current political and civic activities, mode and frequency of communication with other Iranians inside and outside of Iran, response and activities during June 2009 events, response and feelings towards June 2009 events currently, relationship to civic organizations/non-profits, etc., relationship to

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<sup>27</sup> Appendix 2 has the Life History Interview Guide.

Iranians of other faiths or political orientation, purpose and effect of activism, electoral behavior, and desired goals for the future of Iran. Though I did not ask the same things in the same order each time, and I did not ask informants to give me their story chronologically (indeed most people jump around time period and topics quite regularly), they are still organized around linear notions of time, something that Coutin (2011) also noted. I also found myself trying to place the narrative events of their life on a timeline. As an additional note, participant-observation (attending meetings with informants, being part of household activities, etc) complements these interviews.

Repeated interviews allowed me to assess not only their level of political and civic engagement, but its relationship to pre- and post-migration experiences.

### **Participant Observation**

Participant observation commenced fall 2009 when I moved to San Diego. My role as a participant observer shifted back and forth between more passive and more active roles, depending on the situation. I enacted a passive role, for example, in the digital observation of the online community of Iranian.com and HRI's and IAY Facebook group (which I describe more in depth below). I took on a more moderate role as a participant in intimate meyhmooni gatherings in households, as an attendee in the Farsi language class through the Persian Cultural Center on Sunday mornings between September 2010 and May 2011, attending various Persian cultural festivals with family and friends, attending AIAP or HRI meetings as a member, and attending other events such as a local awards show called Passing the Torch. As the hostess for meyhmooni in my own home, I took on a more active role. In the next section, I discuss how virtual ethnography developed throughout the course of research and analysis.

### ***Virtually Ethnography—Evolving and Adjusting Tactics***

In the realm of political discourse in cyberspace, I decided that online groups were to be targeted on which to conduct virtual ethnography (VE). According to Freidenberg (2011), virtual ethnography consists of the following characteristics:

(1) the field site is comprised of internet users; (2) the object of their study is their experience; (3) the practices observed are virtual communications, that is, not face-to-face; and (4) the purpose of virtual interaction is information exchange (265).

Throughout my time interviewing informants in San Diego and conducting participant observation, I continued the virtual ethnography, albeit in a somewhat “casual” manner. I devoted myself to formal and more involved virtual ethnography after the interviews were completed. In this study, VE is complementary to the conventional ethnography, not a replacement for it. My overall goal for the VE was to be able to access broader Iranian migrant political attitudes and discourse, outside of my small sample of interviewed informants.

Digital observation constituted the dominant method I used in virtual ethnography. Freidenberg (2011) points out that digital observation can be as a participant or non-participant. I relied on both formats, but most heavily on non-participant digital observation, and similar to Freidenberg found that the yield derived from such observation to be deep and considerable, and relevant to helping answer research questions. Like on-the-ground Iranian voluntary organizations, I found that Iranian online groups that I observed are hyper-conscious constructions of community. I sought groups that were not only overtly defined as Iranian, but also oriented toward political topics or political discourse. When I started preliminary research in the months

after the June 2009 Presidential election, I found myself swimming in possibilities for investigating political discourse among Iranians online.

Indeed, Iranians inside and outside Iran engage in cyberspace in high numbers (Amini 2010). Inside Iran, the Internet has become a powerful tool of the opposition aiding burgeoning social movements. Iranian dissident groups have employed online activism to broaden their reach and circumvent established propaganda mechanisms of the Islamic Republic of Iran. They can directly exchange information and mobilize with other social movements, as well as develop “solidarity and sympathy around the globe” that would have been impossible with traditional means of communication (Rahimi and Gheytauchi 2012).

Within the diaspora, the Internet satisfies a number of needs for Iranians. It provides a forum for inter-generational dialogue and place for the second generation to learn about Persian expressive culture. Thanks to the Internet, Iranians in the diaspora can purchase products not available in the host country. Iranian entrepreneurs around the world advertise their goods and services through online magazines. The Internet serves as a site to engage in political debate and argumentation on a transnational scale. Information and debate flow across the globe. The Internet serves as a space to share intimate details about ones’ self that Iranian culture’s norms about privacy would not normally allow. For Iranian immigrants, cyberspace constitutes an “alternative territory” where transnational community can be constructed easily and inexpensively (Graham and Khosravi 2002).

In an effort to simplify the “universe” of Iranians in the diaspora using the internet to engage in politics, I initially targeted Facebook groups to study.

## **On the Rise and Fall of Facebook**

Facebook is an online social networking website that lets users interact with each other by sharing information about themselves via personal profiles. Users share their information by “friending” others and allowing them access to their profile. As of mid-2009, Facebook was considered the largest online social network with over 300 million active users, surpassing other online social networks such as MySpace, Friendster, and Bebo.

Although the premise of Facebook rests on members sharing information via an online profile that contains basic information about the user, there have been important additions to the site that have fundamentally changed how users interact with others on Facebook. Facebook introduced the “groups” application in September 2004 as one of its basic features. Facebook groups are virtual communities linking people with some shared interest, attribute, or cause. Groups allows users to share common interests with each other by providing a common space where users can meet others interested in a specific topic, disseminate information about that topic, and have public discussions relevant to that topic. The group application was one of the earliest and still remains one of the most pivotal features contributing to the interactive nature of Facebook. Facebook also made the feed (where users can post messages on other people’s profiles), notes (where users can share their views with blog-like posts), share (where users can post links to external websites on their profile), and fan pages (where users can show support for a public figure), features enabling users to continually interact with each other (Feezell, Conroy and Guerrero 2009). In the last two years, Facebook transitioned users from having a wall to having a feed, yet the wall application has remained for groups.

Preliminary field research revealed that among all the options in New Media, Facebook and news sites (in Farsi or English) were utilized more than MySpace, Twitter, or even blogs. People tend to get their information from trusted news websites, then share and disseminate that through Facebook. Though much has been made of the proliferation of blogs and alternative journalism in Iran (e.g. Kelly and Etling 2008), I found that informants wanted to get their information from a trusted source. Facebook shares the dual purpose of disseminating news information about recent political events as well as being a site for connecting with friends in a purely social manner. Although preliminary fieldwork showed that not all Iranian migrants use the Internet for politically-oriented activities, all respondents noted a surge in online participation after the Iranian election among compatriots. Further, people across several generations use Facebook. I observed that Iranian immigrants from teenage years all the way into their early seventies who use Facebook, although younger generations of users tend to dominate.

I was able to ascertain that Facebook serves as a forum for activist groups as well as individuals to share and exchange information. For instance groups might have their own website, but also a Facebook presence that likely draws more viewers. FB users will post links from other sites as well as YouTube videos, etc. Therefore FB might drive users to explore other political content that they otherwise might not have seen. For groups, Facebook offers users a more democratic forum for disseminating and responding to posts where users from differing political leanings will “meet”. For instance, Iranian American FB users with more conservative political ideologies might post on a group page for more left-leaning ideologies.



An easy way to determine the popularity or currency of a group page is to look at the number of “likes” it has and, also check the dates of the most recent posts. Based on this, I isolated two active “activist” groups on Facebook. Similar to the way I defined activist when sampling for the life history interviews, I define activist as those Facebook groups that advocate for regime change and publish content against the Islamic Republic of Iran, and hold and organize rallies and other events, generally in opposition to the current government.

One group, Human Rights for Iran, is local to San Diego and composed of students from a local university. This is a pseudonym for the actual group’s name out of respect for the help they provided me and invitation to participate in their “secret” Facebook group, with the understanding that I was studying their politics for my dissertation. Their secret group has 41 members, while their public group has 112 members. The FB group’s activity page reflects the fact that their primary identity is as students. Lulls in FB activity mirror their student schedules, including breaks. I have also seen a decline in this group’s activity both virtually and on-the-ground the further we are removed from June 2009. I started following this group late spring 2010 by attending some meetings on campus and being invited to join their secret Facebook group. They also have a public Facebook groups that parallels the private one, and interestingly it is more active than the private. Another group, Iranian American Youth, was initially local to the Washington D.C. region but by 2012 aimed for a national reach. This group is public and has 1819 members as of October 2012. Iranian American Youth (IAY) is primarily a Facebook group with a concomitant website. The Facebook content primarily consists of news stories posted from other outlets, with no ensuing group discussion. IAY

was organized out of the support for Iranian protestors after the June 2009 election.

Around June 2009, IAY did organize support protests, but no other major events since around that time.

Though life history interviews continued to evidence that Facebook is the dominant virtual space for sharing/exchanging political news among Iranian immigrants, over time I found that these Facebook groups' activity was relatively stagnant and one-dimensional in comparison to other online communities I had observed. In short, members of these groups did not engage in true discussion, but rather used Facebook to coordinate group functions. However, one Facebook group, Human Rights for Iran used their group's page to organize political rallies and share current events and news related to the political situation in Iran. The other group, Iranian American Youth, was virtually inactive since 2010. I followed each group's Facebook wall content for a one-year period, September 2011-2012.

### **Iranian.com as Representing a Digital Diaspora**

I found that while Iranian immigrants across the world may broadly connect to Facebook and use Facebook for various reasons, Facebook groups are not the way to understand political discourse among the Iranian virtual immigrant community. While these features do exist and are updated on a semi-regular basis, more politically-oriented discussion and interaction actually takes place on a forum like Iranian.com (IC).

Iranian.com (IC) is a self-described community site for the Iranian diaspora, for “the Iranian expatriates who care about their identity, culture, music, history, politics, literature and each other, as well as friends and family living in Iran.” Its byline is “nothing is sacred” with an illustration of a goldfish, a symbol of the Persian New Year.

This motto, according to the “About Us” page, “reflects our view that religious, political, cultural, or commercial considerations should not prevent the publication of any material.” Founded by publisher and journalist Jahanshah Javid, it has been in existence since July 1995. In the first year the site was updated every two months as it took that long to write and publish material and develop new content. According to Javid, by 1997 it was updated every day as its readership grew and people submitted articles. In 2007, Javid teamed up with a group of private investors from northern California who funded the site to go interactive. It was fortunate and interesting timing before the post-election events in 2009.<sup>28</sup> As of July 2, 2012 the site has 7830 registered members.<sup>29</sup>

As in Facebook, users must register as members in order to post content (such as articles) or to comment on other’s content. Registered users are referred to as bloggers, and each blogger has his/her own page. Most often, usernames are pseudonyms that reflect their politics or origin. There are many more registered users who maybe commented once or twice and much fewer users who post regular content for their blog as an initiating point for discussion, and comment regularly on others’ posts.

The site has quite a busy interface with various top and side banners, like an “Iranian of the Day” section usually featuring political prisoners. The middle area has the headings and links to individual blog posts. It also has areas which show recent comments and most commented posts, “hot today” and most viewed posts. Though the top tabs feature topics like “Music,” “Photos”, Arts & Lit”, “Life” and “Football,” in

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<sup>28</sup> Karami, Arash. “Q&A: Jahanshah Javid: From Iranian.com to Iroon.com” Frontline: Tehran Bureau, 28 August 2012. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2012/08/qa-jahanshah-javid-from-iraniancom-to-irooncom.html>, accessed 24 September 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Most visitors are from North America, Europe and Australia respectively. Iranian.com has a limited number of viewers from Iran because it is blocked by most Internet providers, (<http://www.iranian.com/main/faq>, accessed 5 October 2012).

reality the news and blog sections of the site are the most active and commented upon. The vast majority of the site's content, posted by its members, is news, comments, and opinions of a political nature.

Broadly, the major differences between Facebook and Iranian.com are that Facebook is based on an individual user employing his/her true identity and profile information, and "friending" others and thus creating a network. The groups function in Facebook is actually secondary. IC has users with no associated profile information and allows avatars and multiple i.d.'s. Thus IC members are mostly anonymous unless they choose to use their real identity, which most do not. Users can have their own blog on IC and post original articles, and comment and post on others' blogs. However there is no "network" between members. IC is also editorialized.

I am classifying Iranian.com as representative of a digital diaspora. According to Michel Laguerre a digital diaspora is, "An immigrant group or descendant of an immigrant populations that uses IT connectivity to participate in virtual networks of contacts for a variety of political, economic, social, religious, and communicational purposes that, for the most part, may concern either the homeland, the host land, or both, including its own trajectory abroad" (2010:50). These diaspora-based websites enable the creation of a cyber-community connecting dispersed populations and provide interactivity to members. Members use discussions forums to disseminate information, reinforce or recreate identity, connect to and participate in homeland relationships, festivals, socio-economic development, etc. (Brinkerhoff 2009:14).

## **Digital Observation and Participation**

In terms of virtual diasporas and the groups considered in this study, there are three main types: an on the ground grassroots organization with a concomitant online community, a group that was initiated online and organizes meetings and events periodically, and finally a group that is completely virtual (Brinkerhoff 2009). Human Rights for Iran is an example of the first type, Iranian American Youth is an example of the second type and Iranian.com is an example of the third type.

Though I was a formal participant in each of these groups, in most instances, I did not need to enact my role as a participant in their cyber-forum in order to get the data I needed. Since HRI and IAY are both Facebook groups, my membership consisted of asking the moderators to join their group through my actual Facebook profile. IAY membership demanded virtually nothing from the vast majority of its 1500+ members. This was the least active and most impersonal of all the groups. HRI maintained two Facebook groups, a public one and a private one. HRI's relative small size in comparison to IAY (no more than 115 members in the public group) meant that group members were probably more invested in it. More likely, it was the fact that HRI was initiated as an on the ground grassroots organization and continued to carry out its organizational functions through meetings and planned gatherings that leads itself to more intimacy and investment on the part of the members. In other words, HRI members knew other members in person rather than just through their mutual Facebook group. This was not the case with IAY. While I did post a couple of logistical questions on the HRI group page, for the most part I did not want to interfere with the group's running.

In order to take advantage of all of the features of Iranian.com (IC), the diaspora website, I needed to register as a user. Since the majority of IC users do not use their

actual names but instead rely on an avatar, or screen name, I did likewise using the avatar of “SnakeCharmer.” IC does not ask or require any other personal information to register. Users may submit their geographic region, but the only information that IC displays is how long the user has been a member and their associated blog posts and comments. In this manner, it is easy to ascertain an individual user’s history on the site. In the four months that I closely monitored site content, I did pose comments and follow-up questions on two occasions, neither of which were of much interest for other users to comment or answer. I think it is noteworthy that my attempts at instigating a more engaged participant-observation online were not even noted by other users. It is true that most IC users are themselves just readers, and rarely contribute content of their own. The fact remains that employing digital observation on IC yielded an incredible amount of ethnographic data, and that for this stage of the ethnography it became unnecessary for me to be enact more of a participant by posting blog articles, commenting more on other posts, etc.

Data collection for Iranian.com involved reading blog articles and posts over a four-month period of time, documenting topics and author names, and the number and nature of comments. When a comment by a user interested me, I clicked on their name to see their other articles and comments. I often looked into the area of the homepage that keeps a running tab of the most commented posts to check into the most relevant content of the day.

### ***Data Analysis: Merging Conventional and Virtual Ethnography***

Informants’ interviews were fully transcribed in their entirety and uploaded into NVIVO qualitative analysis software for aid in text analysis. The codebook was

developed using an iterative process. NVIVO employs “nodes” which are user-created to be assigned to the data source. Nodes were applied to the transcripts. Text analysis involved searching for emergent patterns and themes across all interview transcripts were noted, as well as instances when individual informants did not fit the theme (Bernard and Ryan 1998). I ended up conducting formal data analysis of the virtual ethnography data after the life histories were collected and transcribed.

For the virtual ethnography commencing after the interviews, I conducted content analysis from the two different Facebook groups’ (HRI and IAY) postings and comments over a 12-month period. The method I derived was to first save all the relevant content as screenshot images. Each group had a minimum of 100 different files. All of the files were uploaded into NVIVO for coding. Each virtual group had their files coded “in order” by necessity since screenshot images often overlapped or, with one post being “cut” into two different files. Facebook groups’ content was coded for poster name, topic, relevant links to news stories present, and whether there were any follow-up comments. In the middle of the process, I realized that this depth of coding was perhaps overkill, and switched to coding for news topics and categories of political action.

Iranian.com (IC) having much more potentially relevant and richer content than the two FB groups, I focused on coding online discussions broadly using the following themes, posts or comments that a) referenced Iranian political groups b) referenced political/civic life in the U.S c) referenced the characteristic(s) of Iranian communities abroad or d) referenced another aspect of identity such as ethnicity or religion. Also, I needed to note the user name and date of the post. I was more interested in posts that evidenced themes b, c, or d.

The site archives from Iranian.com were also quite useful to me. To determine how closely IC activity is linked to Iranian news stories, I used the site archives to tabulate the number of posts by month and year from 2007 to 2012, focusing especially on 2009 the year of the Presidential election. IC keeps track of number of posts through its archives functions. Number of posts is not an absolutely reliable proxy for activity and relevancy because posts may have increased, decreased or stabilized, but may be independent from other markers of relevancy like number of views. Another way to analyze the currency or popularity of posts is tracking the number of comments, or even the number of views. It is difficult to track posts with the greatest number of comments or views through time because IC itself does not provide a tool that tracks these through site archives.

Overall, virtual ethnography played a complementary role to conventional ethnography. It helped certain findings by providing additional “proof” about certain types of political/civic discourses present among Iranian migrants for instances, but it was also radically different in other areas, like in the tone of the discourse on IC. Therefore, in the writing my aim was to merge both sources of data but along the way had to make decisions on when it was appropriate and when it was not. For instance it was appropriate to integrate instances when I encountered IC members sharing migration stories, but it was not helpful in how migration experiences related to other aspects of identity, for example.

### ***Building Trust vs. Anonymity: Ethics Offline and Online***

Suspicion of outsiders is something that has been documented as a cultural hallmark of the Iranian “personality.” A stranger asking detailed and intimate questions,



especially about political orientation and activities would be doubly threatening. Part of this is culturally conditioned, a result of fear edging on paranoia surrounding the current political regime, and perhaps even the post 9/11 context of anti-Middle Eastern sentiment in the U.S. Mobasher (2006) points to the self-protective measures Iranians employed after facing public discrimination and prejudice after the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis.

Some expressed hesitation to speak to me because they were unsure if I would be able to keep their anonymity or how they would be represented in my research. One informant even spoke of “not wanting to burn his bridges” and needing to maintain his ability to return to Iran without problems. Another said I would have difficulty recruiting people for my study because it was considered odd to sit down with a strange, unrelated female asking him private questions.

It is not necessarily unusual that anthropologists work in small communities. San Diego is not small but there is a finite community of Iranians who participate in the local scene. I have tried my utmost to keep their identities confidential, and concealing their exact roles in local organizations.

However, the ethics of fieldwork and keeping anonymity was made more complex by the fact that I was conducting fieldwork in two arenas with differing ethical standards. Online content is public and therefore not subject to the same protocols and standards. Yet my fieldwork arenas overlapped in some cases so that members of certain online communities knew me personally and were informants in the research. Of course the higher level of protection applies here. For example, Human Rights for Iran is a pseudonym for the actual organization’s name since the Facebook group page has the same name as the organization, and because a few of its members were also informants.

Another issue is that of “lurking” or acting as an unobtrusive observer (Freidenberg 2011) when I did not announce my presence as a researcher. While my presence as a researcher on HRI’s Facebook group page was known, it was almost under total anonymity that I obtained ethnographic data on Iranian.com and acted as a passive observer.

In the analysis and writing, I made no attempt to obscure user names and presented them as they are on Iranian.com. I did this for several reasons. First, most IC users do not use their true names as their screen names; therefore for these individuals they “keep” their anonymity in this ethnography. Secondly, the IC members’ chosen avatars reflect their creativity, political stance, or aspect of their identity. Their screen names were purposeful. I did not feel comfortable “anonymizing” them to come up with a generic pseudonymic screen name. Yet there is the potential ethical dilemma of my own anonymity on IC versus those few users who do in fact use their true names. Of course I did not know the real identities or names of the people posting on IC and even with screen names that seemed as if they were their true names; I have no guaranties of this. I also have to take at face-value that each unique screener name corresponds to one user and that no users have multiple memberships/screener names. In other words, I am assuming a 1:1 correspondence between actual user and screen name, even though there has been some evidence to the contrary. To summarize, the standard I employed for digital observation and analysis was to hide/obscure Facebook identities while with IC members, I used their real avatars. I feel this standard protected the identities of these social media users while still respecting their agency.

### ***Ethnographic Engagement, Ethnographic Authority***

Alleyne asks, “Can we write culture by reading life stories?” (2000:9). The post-modern and reflexive turn in anthropology (Clifford and Marcus 1986) made us more conscious about the act of creating narrative. Through our dialogue, informants and I are creating a narrative together. Through the act of interviewing, informants are constructed as ‘other,’ and in the process between interviewing and writing get enmeshed in layers of interpretation and translation (Crapanzano 1986, Behar 2003). The first layer is translation: informants trying to understand my intent and accommodate my questions. The second layer is of interpretation: making their lives coherent to me and vice versa, me trying to find coherence. The third layer involves both translation and interpretation--me trying to impose order or find patterns across several individual lives. Then there is the effort in configuring life events into a temporal time frame, with beginning, middle and end. All of these tasks involve “numerous acts of judgment” (Lessard, Johnson, and Webber 2011:13) by the informant and me as the interviewer. Informants’ narratives may also contain elements of “image management” in their self-representation to me and prospective audiences, yet these narratives are still concerned within and articulated in a social field, and therefore always dialogical. Personal narrative is ‘artifact’ for at least two other reasons: a) they are created from memories that may exist in problematic relationship to historical fact; b) differing agendas between me as interviewer and informant (Alleyne 2000). Finally, for the purposes of building theory and making arguments I have constructed my research question and methods on this idea of politics that take place in the private sphere of home and meyhmooni and the public sphere of organizations. Yet it is worthwhile to point out that the public-private dichotomy is a

usually awkward construction, albeit a useful model. After all, as Cohen (1994) asserts, selfhood is a composite, the components of which vary in public and private modes.

I wish to conclude this section by posing a question about authority and power differentials. Almost all of my informants were upper-middle or middle class, and elite migrants who were as well educated as myself in most cases, and definitely earned more money than me. They were also fairly socially connected. On an inter-personal level during the interview, can I hazard that the power differential was obliterated, or at least lessened? Yet I acknowledge that the ethnographic authority remains mine as I have final “say” in the write-up.

## Chapter 4 Migration Stories: Narratives of Movement and Staying

“There is a systematically nostalgic displacement between where people have been and the grand narratives of their whereabouts— as if the whole world has spent just one year in a forbidden domain then been yanked away from it, and is now condemned and blessed to forget and remember that space at odd and unpredictable times, remembering it when it thinks it forgotten, forgetting it when it thinks it remembered.”

-Hamid Dabashi (2007:4)

In this chapter I will provide a brief biographical sketch of each of my informants, and discuss their migration stories, highlighting common linkages across all the informants. Moving from migration narratives, I next discuss major aspects of their identities, or as has been framed by Caughey (2006), embed them within major cultural traditions, including ethnic, religious, generational and national as a way to provide further insight into their political and civic participation, which I cover in the next chapter. Based on the analyses of migration stories, I present a common theme across informants’ narratives: a sense of displacement and exile. I discuss the ramifications of a political community that exhibits “exile consciousness,” despite the fact that not all members are truly exiles. A sense of displacement from homeland, and by extension displacement from the homeland’s body politic, permeates across generations and differing migrations statuses and impacts political and civic participation in the host country.

### *Migration Narratives as Stories*

The most fruitful way I learned to start an interview session with my informants was to ask the “how did you get here” question<sup>30</sup>. The answers about their migration

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<sup>30</sup> Meaning, how did you arrive to San Diego?

experience took the form of stories, which can be looked at as narratives (Raj 2003, MacAdams 2008). *Where* in physical space and *when* in the “timeline” of their life they chose to start telling me their story reflects something interesting about them as individuals and as members of a collective. We can look to patterns related to the age at and reasons for migration. Their “migration story” as I call it, is likely something they have told several times, practiced and refined to emphasize certain themes, which they change depending on audience and context. Therefore it is important to look at stories, for “stories are the medium of politics at both the foundational level of creating community and the personal level of identity formation” (Lessard, Johnson, Webber 2011:14). Using this framework provided by Lessard, Johnson, and Webber (2011) provides an opportunity to see stories as a window to the political.

### ***Informant Overviews***

Introducing my informants’ stories, I will highlight some aspect of their personality and identity that was significant to me. In what follows, and throughout the rest of the dissertation I will be using pseudonyms in place of their actual names.

#### **Maliheh**

Maliheh is a sophomore at a state public university. She is a member of the 1.5 generation (Rumbaut 2004) Iranian immigrant population meaning her parents were born in Iran, and she was born in Iran but immigrated to the U.S. as a pre-teen. She is one of the few respondents who actively practices the Islamic religion, and wears the *hijab*. Her family maintains an agriculture-associated business in Iran and her father travels frequently back and forth. Maliheh is involved with the Human Rights for Iran student group and the campus Muslim Students’ Association. At the second interview which was

approximately eight months after the first, she found that she had less time to actively participate in both these groups. She is very conscious of her *hijab* among other Iranians and finds the scrutiny and judgment coming from other Iranians to be worse than coming from Americans. Maliheh finds that other Iranians in the U.S. have little tolerance for those that ascribe to a religious doctrine.

### **Niki**

Niki is a sophomore in a state public university. She is very involved with local politics and clearly articulates herself as an activist. Among her causes is access to voting for disenfranchised populations, especially students. She writes for the school newspaper. She self-describes as being socially and politically aware. Her personal politics and social values are progressive, and she contrasts this with her parents more socially conservative values such as modesty for women and intolerance towards homosexuality. Along with her family, she makes regular visits to Iran. She sees that her connection to Iran is made real by these trips, and also sets her apart from other Iranians in the U.S.

### **Mohsen**

Mohsen is the most recently-arrived of my informants, and the only first-generation immigrant to not emigrate as a result of the 1979 revolution. He migrated with his teenage son, young elementary school aged daughter and wife in 2008 at the age of 46. He has extended family on his wife's side in San Diego. He described the disappointment in his professional life-- the difficulty finding a job in his profession and rebuilding life here after having a comfortable middle class existence in urban Iran. He successfully earned his real estate license here but it coincided with the housing market crash and was not able to build clientele. Currently with his wife, he runs a home-based

travel agency where the majority of clients book trips to Iran. Mohsen was able to take advantage of family reunification policies to migrate, following wife, son and young daughter as well as mother-in-law. His extended family on his wife's side has lived in the San Diego area since the early 1980s. Mohsen serves on the board of one of the local Iranian diaspora organizations and is active voicing his politics through Facebook.

### **Ramin**

Ramin considers himself one of the pioneers of the Iranian-American community in San Diego and has been involved with local Iranian civic organizations for 25+years. Occupationally he is a landscaper, and has an advanced professional degree in horticulture. He writes periodic articles in Farsi for a local bi-lingual arts and culture magazine published monthly. He migrated with his wife and young son first in order to continue his graduate studies, and later they were granted asylum. He says he is in a "mixed marriage" because his background is Moslem and his wife's background is of the Bahá'í faith, though neither is practicing any religion now. He and his wife chose to raise their children without ascribing to any religion.

### **Adnan**

Born in 1961, Adnan came to the United States in 1985-86 about six years after the Revolution in 1979. I met Adnan in the office space where he volunteers, not his home, nor even his work office. Perhaps it was a form of protection for him to meet me in a more "neutral" setting. The interview never formally started—he just started asking questions of me, as if he was trying to ascertain my position and scholarly interests. After a period of time when he was placated with my responses, the interview began in earnest. He is an amateur theoretician of Iranian immigrants, well-versed in social science



concepts and Census data. Adnan is a serious visual artist and musician avocationally. He is the director of one of the San Diego Iranian organizations but is involved with several of the other local Iranian associations, and certainly seems to know everyone. During June 2009 he helped organize local support demonstrations in and near downtown San Diego. But by the time I began to speak with him, he was guarded about these efforts. The notoriety he received by being a more public face of anti-government sentiment in San Diego during 2009-2010 also exposed him to threats from others who did not share his political ideology. Like all of my other informants, Adnan has extended family in Iran. He expressed concern that this political involvement might jeopardize the safety of his family in Iran and being able to visit them. He grew up in a religious conservative family and was not able to “indulge” in art and music until he was an adult. Adnan has adult grown children, and mentioned that one of their bedrooms had been converted to studio space for his wife—he continues to do his art in the garage. Professionally Adnan works for an engineering firm.

### **Fati**

Fati is a self-described “black sheep” and sees this mostly as a result of her non-traditional upbringing. First it was having a very liberal father that valued teaching his children to make their own decisions and made no special concessions between his boy or girl children. Second it was growing up in Kharg, an island in the Persian Gulf and a seaport for the export of oil. Her father was a technician for an oil company, and the entire population of the island at the time was in service to the oil company. As Fati described, Kharg was built for the British but it provided a nice life for Iranians, yet with separate neighborhoods and dining halls for British and for Iranians. Thirdly what sets

her apart was her time going to school in India. She has long been involved in women's rights issues, recounting her decades-long participation in the Iranian Women's Studies Foundation. The IWSF has a yearly conference, usually in Europe, which Fati always attends. She feels that herself and the other long-time participants "have grown up" through the organization. Fati works as a lab technician.

**Afareen**

Afareen first migrated to Germany in 1977 at the age of 19 to pursue higher education. She has a PhD in pharmacology and is a practicing pharmacologist. Along with her husband Behnaz, they are involved in all the local Iranian diaspora organizations and many other civic causes. Afareen says that is her strong commitment to her Bahá'í faith that drives all the hours she spends volunteering and attending meetings and events. She is a native Azeri-speaker, which is a Turkic language, and one of the sub-ethnic groups in the northwest of Iran. Besides being Bahá'í, Afareen is very proud of her Azeri roots.

**Behnaz**

Behnaz is an economics and finance professor, and is married to Afareen, which is his second marriage. They are from the same part of the country and share the same ethnic roots. Behnaz is the only informant that arrived significantly before the Revolution. He came to San Diego in 1965 as a 17 year old , attended high school while living with relatives and went on to get his degrees from a local university. Behnaz shares the same Bahá'í faith with his wife, as well as being involved with multiple organizations and causes. Behnaz and Afareen have two grown children.

## ***Migration, Education and Revolution***

Immigration studies grew out of the Chicago School, the founders of which, were responding to transformative changes and social upheaval associated with the mass immigration of newcomers from rural or urban working class backgrounds (Park 1950). Studies of immigrant lives tend to focus on low wage and economic migrants, especially undocumented migrants, and how the requirements of the legal citizenship structure and constrain immigrant lives in the U.S. (e.g. Portes and Zhou 1993, Rumbaut 1999, Hirschman 1999, Alba and Nee 2003, Portes and Rumbaut 2006). While we may know about middle class migrants from census statistics, electoral behavior, remittance practices, or progress made in socio-economic, residential, political and linguistic integration<sup>31</sup>, there is little basis for understanding actual middle class immigrant experiences from the words and perspectives of the immigrants themselves<sup>32</sup>. For this reason I want to continuously refer to direct passages from informants as a way of giving voice to their experience throughout the rest of the chapters. In what follows here, I draw out prominent themes that presented themselves during informant interviews, and in some cases through online sources.<sup>33</sup>

First generation immigrants who have been out of Iran for two decades or more cite the reasons for leaving Iran, then provide a succession of events which covers the year it was, how old they were, what they were doing at the time. Most importantly, they reveal the relationship between their own personal timeline and the 1979 Iranian

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<sup>31</sup> An October 2012 search of the Migration Policy Institute website, a major think tank and producer of current migration scholarship yielded these kinds of topics.

<sup>32</sup> In anthropology, Raj (2003) and Heiman, Freeman and Leichty (2012) are notable recent exceptions.

<sup>33</sup> Refer to Chapter 3 Methods on complementary uses of virtual and conventional ethnography.

Revolution. Besides the effects of the Iranian Revolution on individual lives, seeking education is the other common theme I heard across all migration stories..<sup>34</sup>

Is it a different challenge to conduct a life history where movement is the central theme? Susan Bibler Coutin (2011) in her life histories of Salvadoran youth shows how turning points in a life are experienced as an event of profound disjuncture, “one that the catapults the protagonist into another reality in which he or she must become, in certain respects, someone else?” (246). Among the youth that Coutin studied, it was the migration experience itself that caused the disjuncture. However, for the informants I interviewed, the Iranian revolution was in itself a “turning point” event that caused migration or impacted abilities or desires to return to Iran. In terms of life trajectory, the 1979 Revolution caused immense disjuncture—a stark before and after.

Here Afareen, who left Iran in 1977 at the age of 19, resorts to metaphor using prominent American figures to help me understand her personal and familial situation at the time of the Revolution.

Afareen: See, please don't take him in a wrong way. But I come from a family from Azerbaijan. We are Azeri (ethnic group). And my family if I compare it, it is like Kennedy from Massachusetts \*\*\*\*\* from Azerbaijan. Because of the faith and also the wealth. And therefore in the Revolution we were, we were the first one[s] that -

Tina: Left.

Afareen: We were target[ed]. And Islamic Regime practically took over all the wealth.

Tina: Of your family?

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<sup>34</sup> Some background in this respect: the largest number of immigrants granted lawful permanent residence occurred in 1990. This peak is partially a result of people who arrived in the 1980s and non-legal migrants but did not adjust until the early 1990s. From 1980 to 2004, more than one out of every four Iranian immigrants was a refugee or asylee (Hakimzadeh and Dixon 2006). Further, the number of Iranian students abroad increased from 18,000 in 1963 to 227,497 in 1977 (Bozorgmehr and Sabagh 1988). Between 2000 and 2005, 20 percent of the 15,824 nonimmigrant visas issued to Iranian nationals were student visas (3,323), 21 percent were temporary worker visas (3,316), and 19 percent were visas issued to representatives of foreign governments (2,987) (Hakimzadeh and Dixon 2006).

Afareen: [Nodding] Killed several of my family member[s], including my uncle and my cousins. And for whatever reason my dad escaped the country and could come out of country. Came first to Germany and from Germany they got their visa and came to United States. At that point my sister and my brother they were here in the U.S. and this was happening in 1982, if I'm not mistaken. That they could come and but my sister and my brother way before as I left shortly after be they left too. Here to the U.S.A.

Afareen actually migrated to Germany first at the age of nineteen in order to pursue her bachelor's degree. She had finished one year of university in Iran but frequent school closings because of widespread demonstrations against the Shah disrupted her ability to finish. For Ramin as well, now 62 years old, it was the preceding events before the Revolution that caused him to emigrate from Iran,

Ramin: ...I was twenty- eight when I left Iran. And I left Iran for the purpose of continuing my education. And the reason was at that time we were going through the political conflicts before the revolution of 1979. And uh, all of the schools in Iran, they were on strike. I thought that if I wait here, I'm not going to be able to finish my studies eh, because I wasn't sure how long this turmoil was going to take. So, I decided to apply for the American universities mainly because I was going to a school that was all the classes were teaching English, so it was a collaboration between the Iran government and the United States government. So English was not a problem you know at that time, so the best place for me was to apply for American colleges.

He arrived in 1978 with his wife and one-year old boy, and initially settled in south Texas to attend Texas A&I University for a master's degree in horticulture, which he completed in May 1980. He wished to continue with his PhD, but the Revolution disrupted his plans even from afar as he lost his scientific contacts with his university in Iran,

Ramin ...I had my bachelor degree, so my supervisor, who was the man behind you know as a force as a more force behind me to come out and get my Master's degree, he was supposed to get me a scholarship to go for my PhD. But unfortunately right after the revolution, he was one of the first to be ousted by the new government. So basically the whole thing changed and I was here I financially, I couldn't go for my PhD. And eh, the events in Iran was [sic] not very promising. So I decided to stay here. Then I applied through the immigration.

Tina And what did you? Did you have a special status after you applied? Or?

Ramin I was going from student at that time to become a permanent citizen. And uh,... Actually I applied for the asylum<sup>35</sup>. And uh, because I am coming [from] a family of uh, two religions. I am coming from a Muslim family, my wife is coming from a Bahá'í family.

Tina: Oh, your wife is Bahá'í?

Ramin: And because of her religion and because of her status in Iran, I was approved for asylum....And actually five years later we got our green card and five years after that we got our citizenship

Tina So green card was approximately what year?

Ramin It started from 1980 and probably by 1985 I should say that I had [the] green card.

In Adnan's case, the revolution caused a return migration to Iran. Somehow, he was able to make a case for leaving Iran again later in order to finish his degree,

Adnan I was a student at SDSU<sup>36</sup> in 1979 [when the] revolution took place. I left before finishing my MS thesis. In 1984, I was given a chance to get out of the country to go and finish my thesis. I had to spend 2 years in England before coming back to the States.<sup>37</sup>

For 1.5 and second generation informants, they relate their *parents'* reasons for migration as part of the context for their *own* life history. However, the details and dates are more vague,

Malieh So my grandparents, my mom's parents, and all their children had moved to America after the revolution, I think. And my mom, so my mom lived in America, back in whatever like 1970, wait the revolution was 79 or 69?

Niki's parents are both from Esfahan, a "conservative large city." Her dad obtained his college degree in the United States after he arrived at the age of 23, while her mom got her degree in Iran. Niki cannot pinpoint exactly how long her father was in the U.S. before returning to Iran to marry her mother, then move to the U.S.,

Niki My dad was here for like, 10, 15, about 10/15 years before he actually went back to Iran, married my mom, and brought her to United States. So they did get married over there, but my dad had already moved to the

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<sup>35</sup> After the Islamic Revolution, members of the Bahá'í faith were persecuted.

<sup>36</sup> SDSU is an acronym for San Diego State University.

<sup>37</sup> Adnan did not provide these details during our interviews. I later asked him over email, and this is all he would share.

- United States by then.
- Tina I see, and what was, his reason for emigrating was that he was a student?
- Niki He, yeah, he was seeking, he didn't get the opportunities he wanted, in terms of education, back at home. So that's why...

This “fuzziness” about the dates and orders of events was common among the younger informants. Yet the fact that they relate these details shows how their parents’ migration stories are still part of their own life history narratives.

In addition to hosting face to face interviews, I also sought migration stories in virtual documents. I observed that migration stories can be exchanged online between members of a virtual community. Anonymous Observer<sup>38</sup> who was the author of a blog article titled “The Good American: Why Iranian Americans Will Never Advance” on September 3, 2012 garnered 149 comments and was the source of several heated discussions. The gist of the article was a criticism leveled at fellow Iranian Americans as being disconnected from American politics and politically unaware. I discuss and analyze this particular blog post and the commentary in Chapter 5, but the dialogue in question here meandered beyond the original point of the article and occurred toward the last of the 149 total comments posted thus far. “AO” stands for the avatar “Anonymous Observer.” Ali Mostofi, for all intents and purposes looks like to be the user’s real name. These two users have some history together on the site, and this is the first time that they recognize that they are dialoguing across generations. Here they discuss their age and whereabouts during the Revolution,

Ali Mostofi: AO, I do not know how old you are, but I am 55. I was at Princeton when all this was unraveling. As you can imagine, we

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<sup>38</sup> Throughout this ethnography, I am using actual user names of Iranian.com members for the virtual ethnography. This is unlike my practice of using pseudonyms for informants from conventional ethnography.

had pretty high level discussions at the time about all the permutations.

AO: Anyway, you have some very valid points. I was pretty much an infant when the revolution was happening. But after reading so much about the events of the time, listening to parents, friends and relatives who were adults at the time, and watching news and other footage about the devolution of 1979, I have to say that I grudgingly [sic] agree with Zandanian<sup>39</sup> when he says that Shah's greatest enemy was himself. From trying to appease the clergy in the hopes of being left alone, to abandoning power too easily, Shah brought this misery upon himself--and us by extension.

This exchange highlights something else important about migration stories among Iranians in the diaspora. As Lessard, Johnson, and Webber (2011) claim, stories and narrative function to draw boundaries between who is in and who is out, “Their success as stories inheres in their resonance with familial and religious values, and with prevailing assumptions about who belongs and who is a stranger” (14). In the case of diaspora Iranians, exchanging migration stories often functions as a symbolic badge and way to begin to understand the other. I can compare migration stories to the way adult Americans remember where they were and what they were doing on September 11, 2001 during the World Trade Center attacks, or Americans of an older generation always remembering where they were when they heard about the death of President Kennedy.

Because so many Iranians outside Iran share similar themes of revolution, education and displacement across all their migration stories, it becomes a bridge across space to diaspora members everywhere, and across generations, too. Migration stories are ripe with symbolism also for what is forgotten and what has turned to “nostalgic displacement” as the quote by Hamid Dabashi above reminds us. Movement and migration reveal certain categories of identity into hi-relief: gender, ethnicity, religion,

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<sup>39</sup> Another user avatar whose name means “prisoner” in Farsi.



age, and politics. In this next section I discuss instances where I note aspects of identity shifting betwixt and between those categories as a result of the migration experience.

### ***Identities in Motion***

Adnan remarked on something during our first meeting that was an astute observation about the effect of migration on the people he had observed during all of his years volunteering and working with local Iranian voluntary associations. He notes that some aspects of identity shift and change because of the migration experience. This specifically depends on when people arrived: right before the revolution, right after the revolution, during the late 1980s-early 1990s, and post-2000, etc.; and whether they had to migrate to other countries like Sweden, Germany or Canada first before they could come to the U.S. He describes their experience in these other countries as a new chance, and “That it was like a drawing board for them then after they get their act together and establish, you know life over there then they came to United States.” He contrasted himself arriving as an adult to a second-generation Iranian American being raised here, “You know when I come here at you know twenty five, thirty years old, my personality is already formed and if I want to adopt new things you know I have to put the effort to do that and I have to be selective and I have to be choosing and the practicing and you know, turn away bad stuff and grabbing new, good stuff.” Adult migrants need to work at integrating themselves into the dominant culture, while the children tend to pick it up “naturally” from school and so forth. Adnan observes “waves of every ten years” of people arriving to take advantage of family re-unification programs. Yet, “For me the main thing is the cultural differences, the people who were in Iran or recently came from

Iran they are so different from people who were here longer.” In this dialogue, Adnan elaborates on his interpretation of these cultural differences that he sees,

Tina: What do you see?

Adnan: Oh, a lot of differences, the way they [were] raised over there, the country is basically based on lies and...the what you call it... like they pretend to be something you are not, people have multiple personalities okay, in many cases because uh they have to, the way they are at home they cannot be the same way when their at work or their on the street or doing other things so for each environment they have they created certain personality so it's not just, what they used to call them schizophrenic but now it multiple personalities.

Tina: Kind of like an adaptive...

Adnan: Adaptive and they do a great job, and then when they come here they face this culture, the kind of get in a culture shock you know, with cultures I guess basically it happens to everyone but when they come here and they see their relatives who were here longer their culture has changed, for both side is kind of shocking because you know their cousins or brothers and sisters now that lived ten years apart from come from Iran, they are so different so they develop different personalities and different attitudes and different everything towards...

Tina: And I bet the people who were here have a conception of Iran, the people were already here have a conception of what Iran was you know in the word of the culture maybe in their head is static, the moment that they left it hasn't changed for them

Adnan: That and also, they were selective on other parts of the culture too so the sister was not forced to practice those culture so there were most of the a lot of them they were selective, they throw away the parts that were not really good.

Tina: Like what?

Adnan: Like um, uh, ...uh I don't want to use you know words that will come back and haunt me.

Tina: What could you possibly say?

Adnan: No it's not pretending the pretending, doing something that you don't believe in and going and pretending you know for work, pretending to be Moslem yet you are not, pretending to be supporting or supporting the government when you're not, so that this double personalities stuff then they come here and they were see the people who were here, it's different, but the people who were here you know, they don't have to pretend, they don't have to they were they were a lot of stuff, they don't need to keep up. So they selected the good stuff like upholding cultural stuff you know...

In the beginning part of this passage Adnan offers an informant's account that corresponds with the theoretical literature of identity change during migration, yet within this notion of Iranians needing to develop "multiple personalities" in order to survive in the Islamic Republic of Iran. A façade of pretense and lies about politics and religion creates a kind of schizophrenia. A "need to pretend" and "keep up" operates like a mental illness in the lives of those more recently-arrived, according to Adnan. This explanation is similar to a theoretical framework suggested by Ansari (1988) based on research among Iranians residing in the East Coast during 1972-74. Ansari proposes the concept of Iranian "dual marginality" because they are maladjusted both in Iran prior to emigration and as middle class professionals in the U.S., therefore living in two "antagonistic cultures." They have ambivalence about living here and are detached both from Iran and the U.S. Though they are naturalized citizens, they are consciously opposed to what they see as Americanization, losing the Persian language, cultural and social values, etc. The group is fragmented, yet commonly exhibits a yearning to return or, what has been called "exile consciousness"<sup>40</sup> by Edward Said (2000) and others. The essence of Ansari's proposal about Iranian dual marginality rings true in the voices of my informants and the kind of discourse I encountered in virtual communities online: the criticism leveled at other Iranian Americans about their failure to effectively and actively take part in life in the United States. Yet, does this characterization ring true in the lives of experiences of my informants? What affiliations and forms of community come up in their narratives and where are the individual places of fissure? How has the experience of migration changed aspects of their identity?

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<sup>40</sup> However, Abraham (1990) calls into question the validity of Ansari's (1988) findings based on how long it took to publish the data, the fact that it does not take into consideration the effect of the post-Revolution migration of Iranians, and calls into question the sample selection.

Participating in the civic and political life of the U.S. is a distinct part of informants' identity, and one in which they distinguished themselves from other Iranians. How this plays out is covered in Chapter 5. The rest of this chapter is concerned with considering aspects of identity that have either: a) remained the same, b) have been hybridized, or c) completely transformed as a result of the migration process.<sup>41</sup> Among the major axes that identity can operate: ethnic/cultural, national, class, political, religious, generational, professional, etc. (Caughey 2006), not all of them have been given equal measure in informants' narratives. Following their lead, I will focus on religious, political, generational and ethnic/cultural identity. The following diagram helps illustrate the differentiated outcomes of each aspect of identity through the migration process and across the life course.

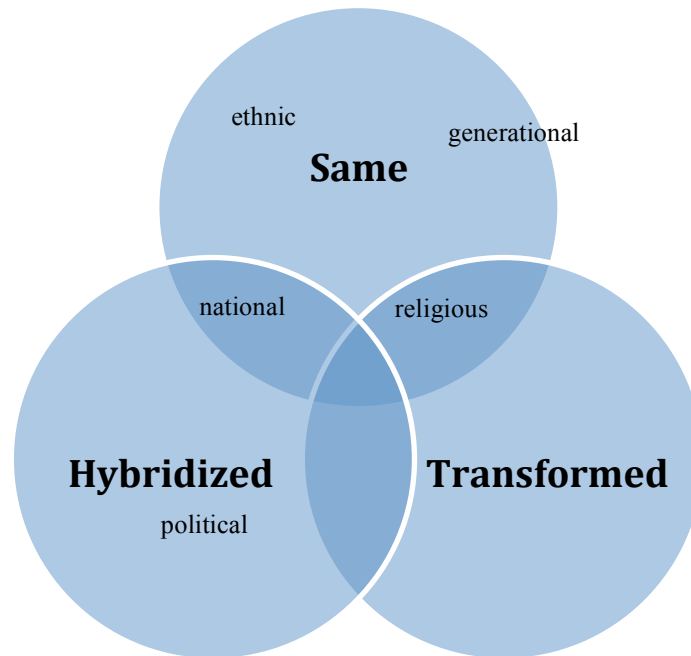


Figure 3 Diagram, Aspects of Identity Model

- Religious identity either transformed or remained the same.

<sup>41</sup> To be sure, an idealized continuum since in practice these categories are not finitely bounded.

- Political identity hybridized in all cases.
- Ethnic identity potentially stayed the same, not enough data.
- National identity hybridized among second generation, but not necessarily among first.
- Generational identity presents a more complex picture of life course vs. migration effects, and is strongly linked to political identity. It is based on shared experience of the 1979 Iranian Revolution for first generation immigrants, or 2009 Iranian Presidential election among the second generation.

## **Aspects of Identity that Remained the Same**

### **Religious**

Mohsen migrated to the U.S. in his mid-40s and has resided in the U.S. only since 2008. He was raised in a Moslem family in Teheran and attended a religious school during his elementary through high school years. In these two passages he describes the source of his aversion to Islam stemming from his experiences with the Revolution and living under the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Mohsen        Yeah, I don't remember anything about those times. But the major thing I'm not, again, I'm not a fan of any religion anymore is because of the Revolution. What happened during the Revolution, in the name of, you know, Islam and what they did to the people and in Iran. And, then started some, you know, studying by myself, thinking by myself. Mostly thinking, not too much studying. Just thinking about what they are saying, and what the religion is saying, and what my belief is. Right. I don't believe in any religion. I'm not saying I'm not believing in God, no I can't say that. I don't know what it is. There should be something. But I don't believe in any religion.

This lack of adherence to an organized religion remained even after migrating. I asked a question about how he deals with potential conflicting religious ideologies during social visits, or meyhmooni. In response, he describes his attitude toward meeting people of different faiths in his day-to-day interactions in San Diego, including Mormon neighbors down the street,

Mohsen        Frankly speaking, I do not ask anybody what their religion is, because it is not important to me. For myself, I have born Moslem but I do not believe

in Islam. And because of that it's not important for me what [the] religion [is] of the people that I'm dealing with or friends or family or anyone. As I said, I don't have any problem with that. But for... we have a neighbor here, an American neighbor, who is Mormon at the other side of the street. We are going with them you know to have dinner party together sometimes. The other one is Catholic, but as I said it's not an issue for me, the religion is not an issue for me. As far as they are human, you know, as I said everybody is asking me "what's your religion?" I said I don't believe in any religion but the only thing I believe in, you know, believe is in humanity. Anybody who is a human and accepts human, you know, rules, its okay no matter what religion they have

Fati describes her resistance to Islam as emanating from negative experiences during child hood, and concurrently being influenced by a permissive father who believed in “freedom” and a “democratic” household [Fati’s terms] for raising his children.

Fati            Like, I didn’t want to learn Qur’an, my dad didn’t know, my mom didn’t know. So when I was in school till the teacher died, who was very strict, I would always – they asked me always to stand up for two hours with one leg up, one leg like this. And there was a guy who was Bahá’í, he would go in my class and tell my mom, because he didn’t have to come to Qur’an class. And he would go and tell my mom, and by the time I came out of the class, my mom was all red in her eyes and my dad didn’t have any relation with these religious people in the mosque.

In this passage, she recalls that her father was not a religious man. For this reason and the fact of her family’s association with Bahá’ís, the other townspeople shunned their family. Later life experiences with political movements right around the time of the Revolution in Iran and India (where she attended university) as a young person before migrating to the U.S. informed both her political views and religious views. As an adult into middle age, her participation with Iranian diaspora organizations in San Diego which she describes as “worse than *Jomhooriye Islami*<sup>42</sup>” in that they do not function as democracies to allow free speech concomitant with her heavy investment in the women’s rights movement in Iran have only served to reinforce her anti-religion stance. In social

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<sup>42</sup> Islamic Republic

situations, the religious background of other people is not an issue, and not something she is aware of. Fati says, “Here in San Diego, I don’t know who is Jewish or who is Bahá’í really, but I – I really don’t ask their religion, personally, myself, I’m like that.”

### **Ethnic**

Ethnic identity rarely came up during informant interviews. Ethnic identity here actually refers to sub-national ethnicities, and what Bozorgmehr (1997) calls “internal ethnicity.” Some examples would be Baluchi, Azeri, Kurd<sup>43</sup>, etc. In those two occurrences that it was mentioned, it was described as an aspect of identity that strongly remained throughout one’s life course, and not necessarily affected by the migration process. Adnan, a long-time local leader in Iranian diaspora organizations and “amateur” social scientist conducts his own periodic surveys among the students and parents who attend the Farsi language program. Here he educates me on how sub-national ethnicities persist among the local immigrant population,

Tina Did you ask about Persian? Did you ask about the Persian label?  
Adnan No, It I don’t use Persian label because I don’t think it’s fair to say Persian  
Tina People still self-identify though...  
Adnan Right but just imagine, Persian is another race in Iran, say 1 in 27 races are Persians. Persians are majority of course and they have been in power so they are the dominant culture but there are other cultures in Iran but if you look at that that’s one that would interest you, the different language and different culture that are in Iran and the Persian are just the other ones so there are a lot of people especially the minorities you want to call them, they get offended when you call them Persian, they don’t like to be called Persian.  
Tina Do you see the presence of those ethnic minority groups in San Diego?  
Adnan Yeah  
Tina What do you see?  
Adnan Yeah, but it there were minorities in Iran, okay, and they were survivors, they were thriving against the majority rule, okay, the Persian domination you know so these guys either they were Turks or Arabs or Baluchi or you know, Kurds and Lurs and whatever, and these guys were just fighting to keep their identity, but when they come here they identify themselves more Iranian, see what I’m saying, at least they are part of a bigger group

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<sup>43</sup> As described in Chapter 1, these are a few of the sub-ethnic groups in Iran.

not just being a part of smaller and smaller and smaller group so they can identify themselves Iranian but not necessarily Persian.

Adnan's sympathetic and enlightened view of these sub-national ethnicities is not always maintained online, where I witnessed Iranian.com users bashing ethnic minority populations in Iran, most often it was Azeris. However, even those that may be sympathetic to Azeri rights and independence might still harbor prejudice for another group. For instance Iranian.com user Sasan.Khoramdin standing up for Bahá'í's<sup>44</sup> in one comment accused the previous poster of not being a "true" Iranian, and being an "Arab lover."<sup>45</sup>

Virtually, I also saw instances of various users asserting their ethnic identity, such as the following by user leili2012,

Azerbaijan will be united one day. South Azerbaijan will join North and live free from ignorant persian [sic] hegemony, oppression, religious bigotry. Whether Iranians like it or not. We want SEPARATION from IRAN [emphasis in original].<sup>46</sup>

Also by user Savalan, who has as his/her avatar a unique image (in that it was not one of the stock choices of avatars provided by Iranian.com) which consists of a stylized, pixelated black and white photo of a man with closed eyes, and a white bandage over his

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<sup>44</sup> Admittedly, Baha'í's do not constitute a separate ethnic group, but a religious group. The context here is that frequently in Iranian.com discussions, a couple of users will start bashing particular individuals and groups, such as Azeris and Baha'í's .

<sup>45</sup> Response to user named "Sister Basiji", September 22, 2012. Basiji refers to the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution.

<sup>46</sup> Posted August 30, 2012 in response to blog article about California congressman Dana Rohrbacher putting forth a proposal to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to support the unification of Azerbaijan. The original blog article by user Touraj Daryee, calling Rep. Rohrbacher's proposal misguided and ignorant, generated a heated and contentious debate among users, generally falling along ethnic lines between those calling themselves "pure" Persian and those calling themselves Azeri/Turkish. The full text of the blog article and response posts are available in appendix 4.



mouth inscribed with the word “freedom,” and periodically comments about Azeri rights on a number of posts,

Since early childhood, I have been exposed to the racial discrimination against the ethnic group into which I was born. As a school boy, I was not allowed to speak my mother tongue, Azerbaijani Turkic. I never saw text books written in my language. I was not taught to read and write my language or learn about my culture and history. As Iran’s only official language Farsi, the Persian language was imposed on us. We were forced to learn Persian language, Persian history, and Persian culture as the common identity of all Iranians. I have experienced my ethnic group routinely and openly insulted on radio, television and in the state run national press. Even now, my people are depicted as intellectually challenged and are dehumanized as “donkeys” and “cockroaches”. Racial discrimination is still with us. Banning of all non-Farsi languages continues, ethnic groups, particularly, Turks and Semites are dehumanized.

Where asserting ethnic identity seems to be a point of contention online, this was not the case in the second instance where sub-national ethnicity was mentioned by informants. During Behnaz and Afareen’s interviews, I asked if Azeri heritage was a crucial aspect of Afareen’s identity in the U.S., she answered that she was a “very proud Azeri” and promoted the Azeri culture and identity. Yet for her, Azeri identity is not in conflict with her Iranian identity, “Wherever we go we introduce ourselves from which part of Iran. Iranian from Azerbaijan. And always we explain to them and our events try always to have the music, the culture.” Afareen described a recent surprise party she threw for her husband with over 200 fellow Azeris and that she did not allow anyone to speak Farsi at the party, “Just in English and Turkish.” I asked if the adamant assertion of Azeri identity was ever in conflict with the Persian dominant community here. For both Behnaz and Afareen, it was not,

Afareen        Actually because of my strong character, probably your cousins, all they know where I'm standing with my heritage and being from Azerbaijan and whoever ask me very proudly I say I'm from Azerbaijan. And they

are okay with that [laughing]. If they are not that's their problem.

Persian ethnic domination over other ethnicities, such as Azeri, explains why it is an aspect of identity that does not change through the life course and/or as a result of migration. This kind of ethnic suppression would make up part of early life experiences. Because Persian ethnicity is predominant among Iranian migrants, it stands to reason why the continued assertion of such identities remains important, as Adnan surmised. I have no data from subsequent generations that are members of these other groups to understand how this might play out in their life course. This finding correlates with Bozorgmehr's (1997) finding that for other ethnic groups besides Persians, pre-migration ethnicity is an important aspect of post-migration ethnicity. As ethnic identity was not mentioned during the other interviews, I can only surmise that either the other informants considered themselves to be "Persian" and/or sub-national ethnicity was not an operationalized identity in their life. Sampling more heavily from more recently-arrived Iranian immigrants, or if my study had taken place in Los Angeles might have yielded stronger sub-ethnic identity affiliations.

## **Hybridized Aspects of Identity**

### **Political**

Fati's politics is an excellent example of how the migration process hybridized her political identity. Certain political ideologies have remained the same, while others have changed and become more inclusive. She believes that democracy is something that emanates 'from below,' that you learn it from childhood in the society and family you are raised,

Fati So in a way, when you grow up in a country that there's no democracy, you don't learn democracy. From home to school to society, it's always dictatorship. You learn to be [a] dictator yourself. You learn to be not giving the right to anybody

else. Including myself! You have to train yourself all the time not to be – and you're always to miss it because you don't know any better!

She feels that Iranians in Iran *and* abroad are not ready for democracy, and therefore the legacy of dictatorship continues, as evidenced in the non-democratic ways San Diego Iranian organizations are run, and the fact that she feels silenced by many of their practices. The way that local efforts to support the Green Movement in Iran broke down into conflict along separate political factions was further proof for her that even Iranian immigrants have not learned equality and consensus, “Because, again, democracy doesn't work if you don't train yourself as a democratic person.”

Though Fati has been involved as a member of local diaspora organizations for many years, she considers her work on women's rights issues and particularly her involvement with the Iranian Women's Studies Foundation to be the most critical to her identity. She acknowledges that her interest in women's rights started at an early age,

Fati            I really don't know how it started, but it was probably a lot of affect from my dad. He was really always insisting on women's rights and human's rights, even though he himself didn't do, and I think a lot of it with my mom, trying to always tell us, “you have to go to college,” “you have to have your own bank account,” you have – she didn't know much, but what she didn't have she wanted us to have. First was education, second was independence. And I think that her insisting on independency was so much that none of the girls got married, except one! And I think it was her that she always said, “Oh, you don't need a man in life if you have education, if you have your own work and your own things.” So it was, kind of – both of them - one through intellectual way of it, and one through her own hard work, through what she went through. But it started really for me, I think it was when I was in that Iranian group for democracy in India, and I was – grew up in such an open society. Like, nothing was bad. Everything we did was okay. And then all of a sudden I come to India with a bunch of Iranian men who everything you did was not right. So, I think it just made me think that ‘what is right, then? What is wrong?’ And then [I] went from there. By the time I was 23 or 24, I have already moved [between] so many states and so many countries, so

when I came here, actually it was only the women who were active and they were active on really women's issue[s].

The ideals emanating from her mother's words and her father's example, and growing up in a relatively free and permissive household shaped her early political ideology. Upon arriving in India when she was 20 years old in 1976 to attend university, she was first exposed to more traditionally-minded Iranian men who found fault with her. For Fati, her core identity is strongly tied to the political causes she believes in. Being a fellow Iranian is not enough, they have to have a shared interest in the same political causes. An expansion of her women's rights work, Fati embraces open dialogue and full rights for gay and lesbians, a topic that is taboo in Iranian society.

Fati Well, to me, a woman's rights are human rights. Gay and lesbians are human and to me, Iranian society has not even [gotten] close to that – a lot of my friends who are gay and lesbian and they come to these [IWSF] conferences.

When it comes to gay and lesbian issues, you see most of the political aggressive, progressive, and passionate human rights and democracy fighter, being stopped there. They will stop there, and don't talk about it. I remember ten years ago, I went to the first gay and lesbian conference, and I came and I told everybody, nobody wanted to go with me. And when I came back, a lot of people who had children, 7-8 years old, they told me, "Gosh, Fati, don't talk in front of my children about you went to that!"

And a few of [my] friends, who I was very close, sometimes you get in power with people and your passion is shared with other people, they told me they don't want to hear about it. They're too old to hear about it. And, it is sad.

So I think as a – I really – it's a catching point for me, if you touch this issue with [an] open-mind, I will consider you – it's like a point for me that I will find openness, democracy, and human rights in people's minds. If you don't touch that issue, I will still think about you as a person in Islamic Republic of Iran system who is religious-minded, but has the cover instead of on her face, in his brain.

So that's my point. If I find you enough comfortable to talk, when the day comes that the Peyk or AIAP or ISTA<sup>47</sup> or all these people, we will invite

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<sup>47</sup> Peyk is a local Farsi-English arts and culture magazine published by the Persian Cultural Center. AIAP is the Association of Iranian American Professionals, an Iranian diaspora

a group of people in the Torch of Success<sup>48</sup> – a gay or a lesbian who came out first, who was killed, who was beaten in Iranian society, and call him as somebody who has opened this window of humanity that I am human rights, and I am here. If from that day, invite her in the Torch of Success, then I will go there and attend, and otherwise I think they are still having the same burqa that Khomeini’s regime put it on the people’s face, they have it on their brain. And once they take that, I will fully go with them. I think that’s for myself, that’s how I chose which organization – even in the women’s group, which person I will chose [sic] as a friend, or not [as a] friend.

Because that’s the point that we have to catch. Now everybody’s talking about – 50 years ago we were talking about the separation of state and church. Now everybody talks about it. The society, there’s a point that we catch, and that’s my catch point. When you get to the gay and lesbian [community] and you openly defend them as a human rights issue.

A hypothetical future point in time when gay rights is embraced and defended among the Iranian human rights community and within the larger Iranian society is the “catching point” she refers to.

While Fati’s personal politics have been hybridized in their incorporation of more inclusive ideals influenced by the gay rights movement in the U.S., for the majority of first-generation informants hybridized politics is revealed in *how* and *where* political discourse takes place. It is through the experience of political talk in the context of meyhmooni and other social gatherings that is itself more open, diverse and inclusive of all ideologies, without fear of repercussions on the part of the participants, as Ramin discusses here,

Tina           And you’re talking about, um, the kind of some of the range of political positions and the Iranians in San Diego?

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organization in San Diego. ISTA stands for Iranian Students Association, a student group from a local public university. ISTA and AIAP have strong ties together.

<sup>48</sup> Passing the Torch of Success was a series of awards programs/performances co-organized by the Public Affairs Association of Iranian Americans (PAAIA), a national organization described in Chapter 1, held in major U.S. cities. PAAIA worked with local Iranian non-profits, groups, diaspora organizations in each venue to produce these shows. Fati is referring to the Passing the Torch of Success that was held in San Diego on January 29, 2012.

Ramin            Yeah, yeah, I see oh yeah sure, sure, I see the political philosophies are very much diverse in San Diego. For some people it is very important, some people are gathering only around people that they feel comfortable with, but that has not has been ever true with me or my family, we are very open, and, if somebody believes in a monarchy and I don't like monarchy, that's okay, we can still discuss it, I can tell him my viewpoint and um, I'm willing to listen to theirs. I never, I actually never had thirty three years living in San Diego, I never had any conflict, regarding the philosophical aspect of, you know what people think.

The lack of conflict in social situations, and the expression of differing viewpoints in an open environment provide an opportunity for political talk that represents a new development than what was possible living in Iran. In this passage, Ramin tells us why open and democratic political discourse is a new experience for Iranian immigrants, as the political history of Iran shows that there has been very little opportunity for participation,

Ramin            I think that 50% [of Iranians in the U.S.] who are not interested in politics, they are coming from a major background, you know we have to look at them in a social background that they came from, uh, we have to go back to our system in Iran. And [in] Iran participating in the political activity was not welcome[d] by the government as much. So the governments that we had in Iran, you have to consider that that the Constitution[al] Revolution was about 103/104 years ago so before that it was no participation of people in politics, so from the time of Constitutional Revolution on, the governments that were in power, they never encouraged people to be in an open, political debates, It was always dictated from, by the government, so people look [at] politics as something that has been imposed on them.

Mohsen, who only arrived in 2008 to the U.S., further corroborates this point,

Mohsen            It's the good point of here in the United States that you can say whatever you want and yeah, I discuss. And, my point of view I have, say anything I want. Depends on the other party which I'm talking to. If he is also the same, and believes in this democracy here, no problem. But if he want to, you know, act like Iran, think that he is in Iran and he can do anything he want, he. But still I'm telling you, the people who are here usually don't have this problem because most of them has [come] out of Iran because of the same problem that I had.

Therefore while personal political identities or ideologies may have stayed the same through the life course, the medium and mode of political discourse among Iranians has changed to be more democratic and inclusive, without fear of reprisal. Afareen's best friend is a Mujahideen<sup>49</sup>, yet because of her friendship, she is able to look beyond a political ideology that she finds offensive, "I know where I'm standing with the Mujahideen. But I never let that come in between."

Political discourse that is shared and exchanged within a less restrictive environment also has the potential to effect the formation of political identity vis-à-vis American politics. Mohsen is actively trying to learn about politics and the political parties in the U.S., "I like to learn. How it works, and what Republicans are saying, what Democrats are saying, what people are saying. Because, I'm interested in learn[ing] these things here." Ramin's exposure to democratic ideals and civic culture in the U.S. as well as his life course experience influenced his personal political ideology with respect to American politics. Ramin describes himself as following more Democrat rather than Republican beliefs. He is, in his estimated 50% of the Iranian community that understands and follows American politics, "I am not on the median of the society, I am not the average of the society, I think that I consider myself to be a little above average." Of this half, about 75% of them are also Democrat, with about 10-15% Republican, according to Ramin.

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<sup>49</sup> Mujahideen-e-Khalq, the People's Mujahideen of Iran, also called the MEK, is an Islamic and Marxist political mass movement. MEK participated in the 1979 Revolution to overthrow the Shah, and now as an opposition movement in exile advocates to overthrow the Islamic Republic. MEK, as of September 21, 2012, was removed from the U.S. list of terrorist organizations by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. (Quinn and Hosenball 2012, LaFranchi 2012), Among the Iranian immigrant community, MEK is rumored to have many followers/members in the U.S.

Niki, a second generation informant recognizes that as she grows older and learns more, her own political identity is shifting and changing. Yet, within that, she still maintains “socially liberal and progressive” values and politics that are sometimes in conflict with her parents’ beliefs, “They are a lot less concerned with breaking social barriers and allowing people to have freedoms that they wouldn't normally have in the current society. For example, things like gay marriage or you know even the way women conduct [themselves].”

### **National**

National identity among my informants works in complex ways. Adnan, the amateur social scientist, reported from his survey results among the children and parents at the Farsi language school that the children tended to see themselves as “Iranian-American” and first generation saw themselves as “Iranian.” For him the purpose of the school “is [to] give them a sense of identity that they need.” I would argue that this is true of all my informants—that their involvement with Iranian organizations serves to provide them a sense of identity that has been re-configured through displacement. Indeed, the Association of Iranian American Professionals (AIAP) and Persian Cultural Center (PCC), among other local organizations, formed to help recently-arrived Iranians adapt to their new circumstances, as Ramin explains,

Ramin            They were the first wave of immigrants, so when we came here, it was easy to find one of those psychologists that who immigrated here also to tell us how to cope with this new life. Okay. So that was the main core of those nights of poetry. And we we had all these that they come out and play for free. We had poets that they came out, read their poetry. We had writers we had, you know, thinkers....you know all sort of people, they had a chance to express themselves, and on the other side, people had a place to fill up their Friday night. So they assimilated with each other, they found identity. Okay, and then they felt kind of proud of themselves or comfortable with themselves living here. And from that point they started to open up.



Likewise, Fabos (2002:39) also found that Sudanese NGOs were a significant tool for a cross-section of the Sudanese population in Cairo “to reclaim some of class and professional status lost through displacement.” On the one hand national identity was something taken for granted by informants, and hardly mentioned specifically as related to their identity. On the other hand, Iranian participants in local NGOs are involved in contradictory processes: the pull of sub-national ideologies (like oppositional political parties) and identities (such as non-Persian or non-Moslem) which are counter-hegemonic to the Iranian state and a nationalistic discourse, via local Iranian NGOs that promote ideal of a Iranian diaspora, such that the “concept of nation remains the most obvious platform.” (Fabos 2002:37). Local Iranian organizations by necessity have to make claims to a degree of unity under a nationalist discourse, yet underneath that tent of “Iranian” or “Iranian-American” must be enough room to include a multiplicity of competing religious ideologies, political programs, generational identities, and even sub-national ethnicities. The ways that they might negotiate these potential conflicts is covered in Chapter 5.

## **Transformed Aspects of Identity**

### **Religious**

Turning away from the religion of their upbringing was a common theme among the majority (five out of eight) of my informants. The increasing secularization among Iranian immigrants has been documented by Bozorgmehr (1997). Adnan grew up in a religiously observant household and as he describes, “music was something that was pretty much forbidden in our house because we were very religious... so as soon as I got a chance I bought my first instrument” while in college. Only upon his arrival to the U.S.

in his mid-20s did he really have a chance to explore visual arts and music for which he is so passionate about, “So I always had a passion about music and art, put all that passion to science so it went to science.” On the other hand, his former Moslem identity is linked to a current Iranian immigrant identity,

Adnan            I wrote an article last issue back and I said, you know, I know people who are not even Moslem but when they hear things about this disconnection happening to Moslems and stuff they get their attention, you know this friend of mine was telling me that you know, I don’t know what’s in it, I am not a Muslim and haven’t been Muslim for years, you know, but still that part of my culture is still brings back my mind that I can connect myself to that particular story, so yet, you know, my thing was that you know when I go to movies and I see the credits, I’m looking for Iranian names and listening to NPR and just looking at the names you know there’s Naza Ninji or Aja Lali or other things and the producers and I said well when I heard that this guy Jian Ghomeshi is coming and talking to and has a show, I said Jian Ghomeshi, that’s Iranian that must be Iranian

Likewise, Ramin was raised in a religious household in Iran, however he and his wife chose to raise their children without any religious affiliation. Ramin has two children, the oldest of which was one year old when they migrated to the U.S.

Tina            So have your children been raised in any particular faith?  
Ramin            No not me, not my wife. When we came here, maybe you know, the first effect that we got from United State was freedom of religion, and I really appreciated that. And uh, my wife, by living here, she realized that you know, religion, you can have any religion you want without imposing it on other people, so we decided not to impose that situation to our kids. And both of them, I’m sure they believe in God, but they do, they are familiar about Moslem[s] and they are familiar from Bahá’í, but they don’t practice any.

Likewise, religion is a topic he steers away from among his friends, Iranian or otherwise. I get the sense from informants that it is not uncommon in social situations to encounter people with differing ideologies, yet so as not to offend or create conflict, topics like

religion and politics are not necessarily taboo, but ones which demand sensitivity and the need to tread lightly on the part of actors,

Tina           What do you in San Diego, in terms of, is there ever a conflict between, if you're in a social situation, that somebody is religious or has certain religious ideologies in whatever context? Is that ever an issue when your interacting, say with other Iranians in San Diego?

Ramin         No, no because my vision is just not to value the people by their religious beliefs so for me I have I have many friends from all different religions. I have Christians I have Jews, I have Bahá'í friends, I have Moslem friends, I have atheist friends. But um this issue never has been a part of our conversation, so maybe the way that I am and I don't I don't ask people what kind of religion they have or if they tell me I don't I don't judge them by the religion, so maybe I am a very, very liberal in that sense, it's not at all any importance to me. Uh, and maybe for this reason, I never had any conflict regarding religion, and even on the political uh, uh, philosophies, I never had any conflict, I had people, I have friends that they love the monarchy, I have people that they love socialism, I have people that they like capitalism, And uh, we discuss all different things without, you know judging each other.

Ramin, a “member from day one” of the local Iranian organizations acknowledged that while Iranians are sensitive about discussing religion and politics, the early founders intentionally decided to set these potentially divisive issues aside in favor of discussing other topics like art and music. One of the early functions of such organizations, according to Ramin, was helping its members “psychologically assimilate” to life in the U.S.

As a contrast to Adnan and Ramin, two informants are very observant Bahá'ís. Life course events, specifically experiences during the 1979 Iranian Revolution where relatives were tortured and killed, as Afareen said, “I wanted to forget everything. Because it is very hard to when you think that these people, the Iranians, the one that you live with them and they did all this terrible things to the Bahá'ís or your family” combined with the discrimination they faced from other members of the diaspora

community, only seemed to strengthen their faith. Afareen and Behnaz hold a monthly Bahá'í devotional in their home, among many other volunteer activities driven by her faith,

Afareen        Really if you wanted to categorize that, the belief system, the Bahá'í faith, they to give the service, service of the worship. You know what I mean? In my faith service is the worship. Therefore if we can be help in any way to anybody or so, why not? Whether it is spiritually or it is materially or it is whatever.

### **Generational Identities: Politicization across the Life Course<sup>50</sup>**

Asking the questions I did about the effects (short-term and long-term) of June 2009 political events and conflict did not answer concretely whether it was a pivotal event for Iranian diaspora community as a whole. Rather, informants' narratives revealed a *generational* identity related to going through that experience together. These narratives reflected their positioning with respect to the Iranian regime, and informed their attitudes toward power (abstractly) and their own activism (concretely). Looking at the overarching patterns across life experience and migration experience, the 1979 Islamic Revolution and its aftermath was what led to politicization in the first-generation of Iranian immigrants. In other words, experiencing the Revolution first-hand, having friends or relatives jailed or tortured, and/or life lived under with the Islamic Republic was the hallmark of a certain generational identity.

First-generation informants tended to see it as just another event in the “distressing” history of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). Mitra\*<sup>51</sup>, an early informant, is an example of this attitude. Mitra experienced the Revolution first-hand during her early

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<sup>50</sup> Please also refer to Appendix 3: Case Studies of Reactions to June 2009 and Feelings About Green Movement through Time.

<sup>51</sup> Like all the other informants in this research, this name is a pseudonym.

twenties and was even jailed for some of her political activities. During the height of the June 2009 events she kept up with news of the Green Movement searching for information on its organization, and even attended local rallies. About a year after the June 2009 events, she had a more negative outlook on its outcomes, “Impact on me? On a personal level I have turned more pessimistic. Based on my experiences generally, I realize we can have so little impact... If there is another turn I don’t know if I going to carry a placard.”<sup>52</sup> She recalled that there have been many other similarly “heated” moments in the history of the IRI and did not hold much hope that June 2009 events would change things too much. Similarly, Fati was discouraged by the arguments and conflict that broke out even between local demonstrators as part of the IranPeace group that briefly formed in San Diego as a result of the Green Movement events in Iran, and took that as a sign that Iran itself was not ready for true change.

Fati            I’m just telling you about California, I think it [June 2009] was another historical event. I didn’t see a lot of changes in the communities, in the people’s way of thinking, it went back to the same thing. People wanted to do something; they wanted to be more democratic in their organization. But because they have taught the same people for so long, [that] we are not political, we cannot talk this, we cannot talk that: people would throw them back in their face[s].

The June 2009 presidential election and mass protests, however, was formative for younger generations (1.5 and 2nd) of Iranian Americans. Another early informant, Sia, founded a student group Human Rights for Iran at a local public university basing the model for his organization on another student group called Students for Justice in Palestine, spent the whole year after the June 2009 associated protests in Iran reading about the Green Movement, and “noticed a vacuum here on campus”<sup>53</sup> Sia, who is 1.5

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<sup>52</sup> Interviewed August 12, 2010

<sup>53</sup> May 16, 2011 field notes

generation Iranian, calls the organization he founded and the larger Green Movement it sees itself part of a “transnational”<sup>54</sup> movement. After seeing the coverage of the Green Movement, Sia, a student at a local university, identified himself with the youth protesting in Tehran. In the statement below, he describes how witnessing June 2009 events through YouTube tapped into his conscience and re-ignited his political activism,

Then in 2009, the Green Movement happened. What happened in was Iran erupted again as it did in a smaller scale ten years ago when I left Iran. I and many others throughout the world saw the YouTube videos of Iranian youth going to the streets and risking it all for democracy and social justice in a corrupt impoverished society. They proved to the world that Middle Easterners are not part of a Khamenei-George W. Bush narrative of Clash of Civilizations or need the United States to devastate their country as in Iraq they can do it themselves. My relatives who withstood the thirty years of repression from my uncles, cousins, and grandfather went to the street and called for accountability and a brighter future of Iran. They went knocking on the door to ask “where was their vote?” and were greeted with cattle prods, bullets, and batons. I and many others spent sleepless nights going on Twitter and Facebook My conscience went yelling at me that I need to spread awareness in the States of this glorious achievement by the people of the Middle East and help the people there in any way that I could to make the democracy movement and its political prisoners known to put international pressure. These protests were an existential question and these people put their lives on the line for a future of peace and prosperity for the world instead of war and isolation. Seeing students risking their lives there with the dictatorship there, I believed the least we could do here in the freedom of speech provided us was speak up for these voiceless. For the next 7 months, I immersed myself in activist and human rights networks and following Iranian politics as I did 6 years before. Then in December 2009, while I was engaged with Middle Eastern activism in SJP during their first year and MSA<sup>55</sup> during the first year they put the wall, a video struck me. I watched the video of Bahareh Hedayat, as you know the well-known student leader in Iran, telling students outside of Iran to spread awareness of the students repressed in Iran. She paid the price for that interview she did through the webcast and got sentenced to 81/2 years in prison leaving her husband and family behind. I believed

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<sup>54</sup> At the time, Sia had recently stepped down as president of Human Rights for Iran (HRI) in order to concentrate on finishing his studies, but still clearly heavily influenced the organization. HRI’s close alignment with the Iran’s Green Movement became a bone of contention with other members of the group, as reported to me by another informant.

<sup>55</sup> SJP stands for Students for Justice in Palestine and MSA stands for Muslim Students Association.

there was something that needed to be done. But seeing the culture of apathy of [students at this university] and the ignorance of the Iranian American student population, I thought it would be mission impossible.<sup>56</sup>

Niki, a second-generation Iranian immigrant, was visiting family in Iran during the June 2009 elections. At the time she was an entering freshman into university. It was seeing those events unfold first-hand that helped to politicize her and initiated further action,

Niki            Because of the after-effects I would say I'm definitely more sympathetic... All these things made it so much more real. So when I get involved in politics I try more to imagine what those, what the suppressed person is doing or feeling. You know, kind of make them more human. So I'm a lot more active, I'm a lot more sympathetic. I think that's one of the biggest effects. And like I said, it was very inspiring to me. So anytime I feel that I have more power than someone in terms of being able to change their government, you know I'll get behind my computer and write what I need to write or I will sign the petition I need to sign. I really want to use my freedom to help somebody else because I feel like that's a really important thing to do. So that's what I do a lot, to try to take advantage of my free speech to enable somebody else to one day be able to have their own rights.

Two years after the June 2009 events, Niki reported getting involved with multiple causes on campus, including HRI, and online. Witnessing the protests and government crackdown made her more sympathetic to the “suppressed person,” and the protests themselves were inspirational. In the passage above she uses the terminology of human rights and free speech. In another interview more than 2.5 years after the June 2009 events, Niki reports her continued involvement with several campus causes, yet no longer was an active member of HRI. During this dialogue, she was enthused by her involvement with another organization Student Organized Voter Access Committee (SOVAC), a non-partisan student organization seeking to increase voter registration rates

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<sup>56</sup> This was part of a “farewell speech” Sia delivered to HRI as he was stepping down. He emailed me a copy of it June 17, 2011 as a way of detailing his personal history with Iranian activism.

among university students. Yet the June 2009 events remained a strong motivator for her political participation,

Niki            Well...for SOVAC, the idea of voter, like the power of a vote really resonates with me because of my background with Iran and being in Iran during the elections and seeing the issues that come with fraudulent votes. And, it kind of opened my eyes to how valuable a person's vote is.

Witnessing the post-June 2009 events unfold in Iran energized and motivated younger informants to establish a new activist organization as in Sia's case or become more politically aware and engaged with transnational political movements in Niki's, Sia's, and Malieh's case. In Niki's case, while she later changed her perspective on the long-term effect of those post-election events and what it meant for regime change in Iran, nevertheless witnessing these events continued to inspire her to be politically active in other realms. As members of the older generation of immigrants, Fati and Mitra are like my other informants in that while the June 2009 events caused initial excitement and incited short-term participation in local rallies, they were more likely to view June 2009 as mere incidences in a longer history of political turmoil. This leads me to the thesis that earlier life experiences of disjuncture and political conflict contribute more to politicization than ones happening later in life.

Further, these two separate experiences of homeland conflict—the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the June 2009 Iranian Presidential election and mass protests—not only have differential effects on politicization through the life course depending on the age/generation of the individual at the time of the occurrence, but contribute to a “generational identity” having to do with experiencing those events.<sup>57</sup> That political

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<sup>57</sup> Mohsen, who is the most recently-arrived of my informants, is about a decade younger than the first-generation informants but two decades older than the younger cohort of 1.5 and second generation. He is somewhat of an “outlier” in this respect. Indeed, his attitudes about the



conflict in their parents' homeland had such an impact on their participation in civic life and politics is contrary to the model predicted by Alba & Nee (2003) and Portes and Rumbaut (2001) which posits that subsequent generations of immigrants have declining transnational attachments and practices.

### **Cosmopolitanism and the 'New' Spirituality**

Afareen, Behnaz and Maliheh are notable exceptions, but among the rest of my informants, and the countless other Iranian immigrants I have had contact with throughout fieldwork, the trend among Iranian immigrants is definitely one of turning away from religion or even strident assertions of ethnic or national identity. In its place, informants invoke the mantra of democracy and human rights as universal values, citing phrases related to a "shared humanity." Despite differences in political and religious ideology and identities among my informants, they embrace the values inherent in the notion of cosmopolitanism. Philosopher Kwame Appiah, in describing his Nigerian father, gives a working definition of cosmopolitanism "[he] never saw a conflict between local partialities and a universal morality—between being part of the place you were and a part of a broader human commitment" (2006:xviii). I propose that cosmopolitanism is a discourse which operates among my informants, and is a source of ethics and "spirituality" in its own right. In trying to look at ways in which it is operationalized and functions as an actual ideology in the lives of certain immigrants, especially liberal middle class/elite ones like my informants, I found the values and identities they embrace result from a combination of life course events and exposure to different ideals during post-migration experiences.

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effects of June 2009 do not fit the trend presented here in that those events animated his politics and spurred political action, yet did not necessarily *change* his politics.

### ***Conclusion: Being Separated from Homeland and (In)abilities to Return***

“Half of my life I was in Iran—for the other half Iran was in me.” This phrase was not actually uttered as a phrase by any of the informants. It presented itself to me as a piece of artwork in the home of one of my informants, and was inscribed in Farsi over a painted image. The theme it represents is displacement, something of which all my informants were cognizant. In this passage Fati eloquently describes what it means to be “dislocated from what we wanted to be,” not because earning a livelihood in the home country was impossible, but for other reasons. She also describes how this sense of dislocation even carries over to subsequent generations,

Fati            Iranian community was – even though it was [a] community, but dictatorship, and all this time made us be on the news all the news, or talk about Iran all the time. Plus, we were dislocated from what we wanted to be. We didn’t choose to come to America because we didn’t have money, because we didn’t have [a] job, because we didn’t have a country to live. We are not like Somalians, who don’t have food. Like Filipinos, who don’t have jobs and too much population. Not like India, that there was no job. Not like certain countries: we had food, we had work, we had resources. So we were dislocated. This dislocation brings all the things you have seen in your childhood, and so does my nieces and nephew, they have the effect from us, also.

I qualify this sense of dislocation as an indicator of “exile consciousness.” Despite differing migration statuses among Iranian immigrants, the presence of an exile consciousness is a shared attribute. Said (2000) defines what characterizes exile consciousness as, an “unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted (173).” My sample of informants included refugees, asylees and voluntary immigrants who had come to take advantage of educational opportunities for them or their children. As such, some informants, like Adnan, Niki, and Malieh, do actually make return visits. The others, Afareen, Behnaz, Fati, Ramin, and Mohsen, for various reasons, do not have the

ability to return to Iran for visits. Afareen and Behnaz, who are married to each other, are members of the persecuted Bahá'í religion and had relatives that had been killed in Iran. Another, Fati, who was technically a member of a persecuted opposition party in the 1970s, on a whim applied for the visa lottery while studying in India and was granted a visa. She has not returned to Iran in her nearly three decades in San Diego, partly because she does not feel secure. Ramin does not feel he can return because he has, as he says, a “mixed marriage” in that his family is of a Moslem background and his wife’s is Bahá'í, and sought asylum in the U.S. because of religious persecution. Finally, Mohsen in the nearly four years since migration has not been able to return because he is awaiting U.S. citizenship.

I found that the inability to return became more poignant through the life course the longer after migration, as Afareen shows here,

- Behnaz            And when they played the national anthem I get goosebumps.  
Afareen           Always. I get very, I always get emotional. But it doesn't mean that as a Bahá'í. As I said, as a Bahá'í, we very specifically love Iran.  
Tina:                Yeah. And so, you know, and I hate to pick at a sensitive topic, but the inability to go back.  
Afareen           No. No. That is the hardest part. That it is at this point, specifically for me and for my family, it is almost faraway dream. I can't even dream. Once in a while in my talk I say if I go to Iran. Because my friends they go they come. They bring video. Example, those D\*\*\*\*<sup>58</sup> they are from my hometown.  
Tina                 Oh really.  
Afareen           And every time that they go they go and take, make a film or so. Just because we can't go. Bring they show, oh that's the street that you live, that's the school that we went, that's here or there. Sometimes with my mind say if I go to Iran, what happens, what I'm gonna do. And then when I hit the reality it is almost impossible at this point. Slowly, slowly this dream is fading after so many, 35 years now.

A couple of times during our discussion, the emotion is very near the surface as Afareen is almost in tears, and with long pauses in the flow of conversation. Safran’s (1991)

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<sup>58</sup> Referring to a surname of well-known Iranians in San Diego.

definition of diaspora consciousness includes an orientation to homeland as a mythical place and at the same time, being the true, ideal home to which one should eventually return. As true exiles from their ancestral homeland, Afareen and Behnaz confront the real possibility that they will never be able to return to Iran to see their hometown in their lifetime. Their feelings for their home country are understandably complicated as they elaborate on here,

- Tina            How would you describe your relationship to, I mean given this history of persecution that's happened, what is your relationship to [Iran]?
- Afareen        A lot of love. A lot of love. You have to remember that as a Bahá'í we love Iran. Because the most important reason is because Bahá'u'lláh is from Iran. He's born in that country. And he promised the [u/i 00:28:30] future for Iran and encouraged in his writing and ordered to the Bahá'ís to give the, render the service to Iran and Iranians. Therefore Iran is always in our hearts. No matter what is happening to the Bahá'ís in that country. But in the same time we are sad. Because in the beginning my personal feeling I wanted to forget everything. Because it is very hard to when you think that these people, the Iranians, the one that you live with them and they did all this terrible things to the Bahá'ís or your family. As much that I get older I miss...(long silence)
- Tina            It's okay. You want me to?
- Behnaz        Yeah it's very difficult that you cannot go back to your native country. It is one thing that you don't go back because you are busy or whatever life is here. But the other thing is by virtue of not being able to go.
- Afareen        Not being able to go.

Afareen is profoundly pained by being “cut off” from her hometown. When she first migrated she wanted to “forget everything” but the realization that she cannot ever return in her lifetime has forced her to confront her anger and sadness. Yngvesson and Coutin write in their analysis of narratives from Salvadoran youth who were forced to return to their country of origin and adoptees that the idea of ‘return’ is sometimes built upon a fallacy of an “original self” predicated on a single origin when “relocation may be

a moment when one self is officially constituted and another is ‘cut away’” (2006:178). For Afareen and Behnaz, that part of their life has been cut away.

While “not being able to go” is different than choosing not to go, even for those who have the choice, it is a decision fraught with anxiety, emotion and uncertainty. For Ramin and his family, there is fear left unsaid in returning to Iran for a visit. In speaking only of his ability to return because it was an impossibility for his Bahá’í wife, there is much uncertainty for him pertaining to the problems that are associated from the couple’s mixed marriage, “So I wasn’t really confident by going back I didn’t know, I just didn’t want to put myself in a situation that I have to go through interviews and tell them why I married and you know what is this? Am I still you know lenient toward Bahá’í or not and what is your religion and I just didn’t I didn’t feel comfortable...” Being in exile implies an eventual return, even though return is not always possible, or even desirable.

In contrast, Adnan, a first generation informant, makes return trips to visit friends and family every few years. Niki and Malieh from the younger generation of informants are able make periodic visits to their parents’ homeland. Mina feels these trips symbolize her Iranian identity, and that her connection is made more real by frequent visits,

Niki            So, just emotionally that makes me more tied to Iran. Seeing it all the time, and talking to people there all the time, reminding myself that it's a place that's real, it exists. Whereas to someone who hasn't been to Iran in 20-30 years, that's more of a memory than a reality. The fact that the only family I have here are my mom, dad, and brother. I don't have any other family here. I don't have any other, anything else tying me here. All of the family that, other than that, is in Iran. And those ties are very, very strong. And the sense of identity that they give me is very very strong and important. Yeah, I think identity is another one. I think some Iranians, depending on the experience they had in Iran, come here with the intention of abandoning that part of themselves and which I personally find completely understandable. They went through some very awful things there.

She contrasts herself to other Iranians who have not returned, not fully acknowledging the ones not *able* to return. Later in our dialogue I probe and ask what other differences she sees between her family and other Iranian migrants. She attributes the differences to ones of class and religious upbringing, describing her family as coming from “very humble means” and religious, in contrast to the more middle class or elite migrants that came earlier.

The Iranian immigrant population is truly a ‘mixed community’ composed of people with variously situated positions vis-à-vis the Iranian state in their ability to return, as well as differences in class and religious affiliation and ethnicity, as participant-observation showed. Compounding these variances are several different waves of migrants who have different experiences of homeland and host country settlement. The chart below shows the breakdown of the Iranian community by time of migration.

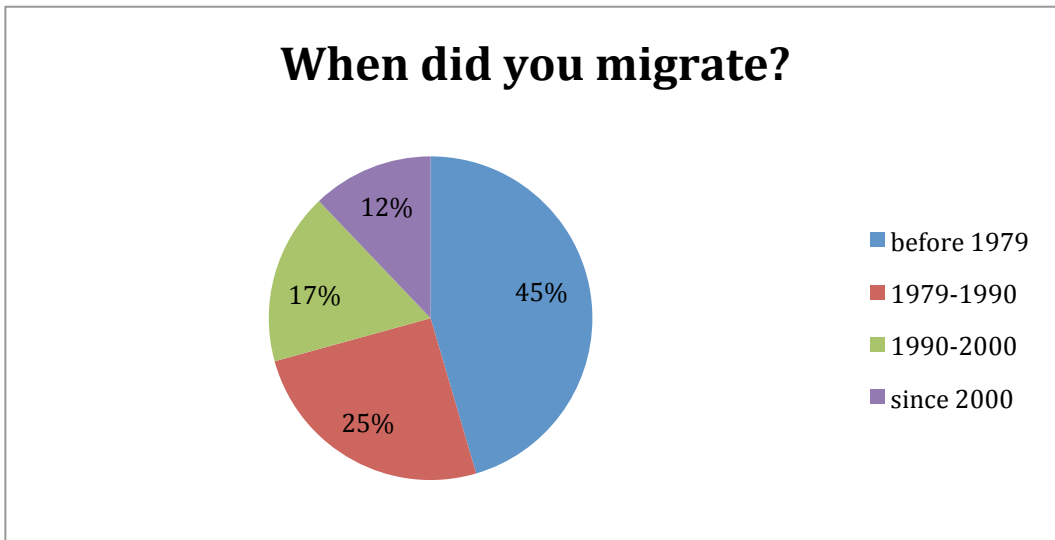


Figure 4 Date of Migration, data from 2008 PAAIA National Public Opinion Telephone Survey, n=401.

Note that the “before 1979” figure is a bit misleading because it includes the population that left in the few years before 1979 as the situation in Iran was deteriorating. It also

does not include the migrants that first went to European countries before being able to immigrate to the U.S.

How do they come together, if at all? I would contend that the presence of exile consciousness constitutes community for Iranian immigrants. A sense of exile consciousness actually permeates through *all* my informants' narratives, despite their ability to return to Iran or when they migrated. In other words, exile can be externally-mandated or internally-imposed. This exile consciousness goes beyond mere nostalgia for something in the past, or as Brah words it, where home becomes a "mythic place of desire" (1996:192). Exile discourse must deal with the continued problematic of multiple locations, and where relationships are not so much based on shared origins (birth, nation, religion, gender) but an attachment to a "common imaginary construct" (Naficy 1993). Exile consciousness among my informants manifests itself as longing for a home you cannot be a part of anymore as a full political member or transnational citizen. Regardless of an individuals' ability to return, or whether they do make return visits, the fact is, that these informants on an emotional and psychological level, and in terms of their personal politics, cannot be a part of the Iranian nation-state because they fundamentally disagree with Iran, and the Islamic Republic. However, Naficy (1993) prods us to not only to think of the dystopic experiences stemming from exile, but also to think of the utopic aspects of the exile experience, "driven by wanderlust and the desire for liberation and freedom," (6). In this chapter I have particularized informants' fixed and shifting values, ideologies, and identities and how they interconnect with specific political experiences in homeland and host country. My argument going into the next chapter is that politically-mediated

exile consciousness and separation from homeland motivates and drives civic and political action and participation in the host country.



## **Chapter 5 The Political and the Personal Domains of Immigrant Experience**

Engagement with politics, especially as it pertains to engagement in the politics of homeland, is a potential moment of “ethnic belonging” (Vega 2012). Yet, political engagement is different in the two sites: with original homeland it signifies reifying belonging to an ethnic persona that comes with birth, while with the chosen homeland, the U.S. it signifies being accepted into a new society. From this new perspective of dual and simultaneous political engagement, this chapter focuses on informants’ narratives that address their agency and activism, and then abstracting to how they address power embedded in different hierarchies. Though, with a few exceptions, Iranian migrants share in common by an anti-regime stance, they do embrace a variety of different political ideologies and political programs with respect to their homeland government. A 2011 national telephone survey confirms this finding, showing that Iranian Americans want the Iranian regime to change with sixty seven percent (67%) preferring a secular democratic Iran, compared to 6% believing any form of an Islamic Republic would work (PAAIA 2011).

In Chapter 4 I discussed migration narratives and aspects of identity. Chapter 5 delves deeper into political identity and how the individual informants intersect with politics on multiple levels. In the first section of this chapter, I analyze what I term “discourses of participation” as articulated by informants and online users, something I witnessed during participant observation as well. Discourses of participation, though they reflect a common concern do not seem to align with the PAAIA survey results, as I will show. In the next section I provide a typology of all the political-civic acts encountered during fieldwork that are presumed to be politically- or civically-related, and then

consider several models to try to make the data fit current models of immigrant political participation. The third section focuses on diaspora organizations locally, their role, and a noted recent trend in their activities. Finally, I propose a model for how personal politics intersect with diaspora organizations. In the last section I present another dominant theme I encountered among my politically and civically-active informants as well as online, the idea that Iranians need to “practice and learn” democratic ideals in order to transform the nation, and why expressions of political variance take on such different forms between online and offline discourses.

### ***Discourses of Participation and “Giving Back”***

The commonality among my Iranian immigrant informants was the fact that they all actively participated in civic and political life in the U.S. This participation takes on a variety of forms, as will be discussed later in this chapter. It stands to reason then, that a significant part of informants’ identity in San Diego and within the larger context of the U.S is the perception that they see themselves as *set apart from* other Iranian immigrants because of political and civic involvement. One of the themes that came up frequently across my informants was a concern about and criticism of those “other” Iranians that either a) were politically and civically apathetic and always thinking of what is going on Iran rather than dealing with realities of daily life in the U.S. and working to improve the situation of Iranians in the U.S. b) did not attend Iranian-specific events or participate in voluntary associations and/or c) somehow took advantage of “the system” broadly meaning to take advantage of U.S. society. Related to this in the virtual community of Iranian.com, accusations of “hate-mongering” and inciting divisiveness are a common occurrence between members. All of this data presents itself as a “rich point” (Agar

1996), why this concern with low participation and lack of community? In the rest of this section, I categorize the related discourse I observed during participant observation, among informants during interviews, and through virtual sources, and then compare with actual statistics derived from a national telephone survey conducted by PAAIA in 2008.

### **Low Involvement with American Politics**

One of the Association of Iranian American Professionals (AIAP) meetings I attended serves as an illustration of the theme of low involvement with American politics. The guest speaker Mahbod Seraji, a San-Francisco based Iranian American writer and management consultant, gave a presentation in Farsi to a room full of doctors, engineers, and PhDs, about Iranians integrating into American culture. He discussed the measures of assimilation—factors like socio-economic status, language attainment, intermarriage and engagement with politics. He then proceeded to provide some U.S. census data about Iranians that I have heard trotted during these kinds of gatherings.<sup>59</sup> This kind of data is used to confirm among themselves the image of Iranians as being “good” and “successful” immigrants, especially in comparison to other recently-arrived immigrant groups. The “good” immigrant is marked as one that is well-adapted to U.S. society, is economically successful and makes a contribution to society.

This particular theme of the “good” immigrant is also represented in the narrative of national Iranian-American advocacy groups and among the discourses of virtual communities. The following text taken from the National Iranian American Council website illustrates this theme, “As one of the most highly educated minority groups in the United States, Iranian Americans have achieved success on many levels – technological,

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<sup>59</sup> For instance, the per capita average income for Iranian Americans is 50% higher than that of the general population. Percentage wise, Iranian-Americans are among the most educated ethnicities in the United States. Iranians hold five times the number of doctorates than the national average (AIAP General Body Meeting October 26, 2011).

scientific, academic and economic life – yet our community’s impact on civil society is a less impressive story.”<sup>60</sup> From the virtual community of Iranian.com, a user named Hafez for Beginners in disputing a point made by the previous poster remarked,

***This seems “silly.” Last time I checked - from among 66 ethnic communities in the US - Iranian-Americans were ranked the most educated and accomplished.*** [emphasis in original]

From the first female space tourist - to Ebay - to some of the best US surgeons [sic]- to CNN anchors and beyond.<sup>61</sup>

Yes, Iranians in the U.S. are rich, powerful and well-educated as the discourse goes, yet, as Mr. Seraji continued to point out; Iranians have very low knowledge of and involvement with American politics. According to my informant Ramin, about 50% of Iranians in the U.S. do not participate in politics, “In other words, some decided not to participate in politics, and... most of them they never been in politics and they never see politics as a very vital mean[s] of them living here. They think that they can live here without vot[ing] or without being involved in politics.” He attributes this difference between people like himself and the others as being “a little above average” and “not on the median of the society.” This particular point went unexamined the rest of the interview, yet has been echoed online. A user from Iranian.com named Fesenjoon<sup>62</sup> disputed Hafez for Beginners earlier point in support of Anonymous Observer’s (AO) assertion that Iranian Americans do not know enough about American politics:

To add to AO, the "top most educated successful minority" status of Iranian-Americans is contested:

<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/06/19/the-rise-of-asian-americans/>

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<sup>60</sup> [http://www.niacouncil.org/site/PageServer?pagename=About\\_index](http://www.niacouncil.org/site/PageServer?pagename=About_index), accessed 29 September 2012

<sup>61</sup> Iranian.com, September 6, 2012

<sup>62</sup> Fesenjoon refers to the name of a popular Iranian dish made from ground up walnuts and pomegranates.

The fact that we have almost no presence in American politics actually puts Iranian-Americans at the very bottom of the minority success chain.<sup>63</sup>

Therefore, the discourse about low Iranian participation in the U.S. political system stands in stark contrast to the discourse about the Iranian immigrant “success story.” Which one is the more dominant of the two? From my experiences, the “model immigrant” trope outsizes the “low participation” discourse, mostly because the people touting this particular criticism about the Iranian population are a minority. The other reason is that “positive” characteristics wield more influence than negative characterizations of the population.

The rest of Mr. Seraji’s lecture during the AIAP meeting was dedicated to presenting social science models of cultural “types”. It seemed as if Mr. Seraji was teaching his audience of Iranian Americans the “whys” of American culture and how it differed from Iranian culture, and reminded me of the culture and personality school that was *en vogue* in anthropology half a century ago. Mr. Seraji drawing from his academic background, and his own life experience adapting to U.S. society made an effort to present this information that was palatable to his audience, by offering comparative lists of attributes of American culture versus Iranian culture<sup>64</sup>. Indeed it was a strange meeting for me as an aspiring scholar of migration and an anthropologist loathe to employ stereotypes of culture. Here, Mohsen, one of my informants, offers his own interpretation of Mr. Seraji’s lecture and explanation for Iranian under-participation in politics,

Yeah what he was saying also was that these Iranians coming here they are not, you know, they are not changing themselves too much to go with the cultur[e] of [the] United States. So, at the end of the speech, as I said,

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<sup>63</sup> Iranian.com September 6, 2012

<sup>64</sup> Some examples of items on the comparative lists—Iranian versus American attitudes towards time—Americans are more punctual while Iranians more lax about time. Or, that Iranians are more communal and family-oriented while Americans more individualistic.

there was questions and answers, and somebody asked different questions. And the thing, one of the questions, that was mine also, was that "What's the reason that you think that it is?" And the reasons came out with so many people talking was that okay, same thing. Lot of people came out of Iran because they were forced to come out of Iran. They did not choose to immigrate. They [had] to immigrate. So when you have to immigrate you love everything that you have over there that you don't want to change it, so it's not gonna happen easily to change, you know, to get use[d] to American culture. The other people was that okay, there is two cultures. We don't want to lose our culture but we want to get the good points of this culture as well. This is what's going to, what should happen. You get the good points of this culture and you keep the good points of your culture and make another thing in between of that. The main idea was that, the thing he was saying that why this is happening, why people, Iranians are not into Iran, uh...American culture still after 30 years of immigrating.

Mohsen's main point is that most Iranians were involuntary migrants and migrated out of necessity, and their hesitation to adapt to "American culture" is borne out of fearing loss of their own culture. This is quite a sympathetic explanation in comparison to other interpretations I encountered online.

As more evidence of the currency of this particular discourse, I offer the following case study from Iranian.com. "Anonymous Observer" (AO) was the author of a blog article titled "The Good American: Why Iranian Americans Will Never Advance" on September 3, 2012.<sup>65</sup> The gist of the article was a criticism leveled at fellow Iranian Americans as being disconnected from American politics and politically unaware. The starting point was a recent discussion on Iranian.com about Texas Representative and Republican presidential candidate Ron Paul. Anonymous Observer in his/her blog post details why a Ron Paul presidency would be disastrous for Iranian Americans. AO's tone is one of strong disapproval and condescension toward Iranian Americans' lack of knowledge and involvement with U.S. politics,

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<sup>65</sup> The full text of this blog post is available in Appendix 4. Posted September 3, 2012. This blog post and ensuing discussion on Iranian.com makes for a good case study to examine Iranian American political discourse.

But none of the above facts, and Ron Paul's scary vision for America seems to bother his Iranian supporters. They have no issues with America being run by a racist and for their children losing their citizenship. Their [sic] only concern in the "old country" and the ability of mullahs to have access to the latest technology, free trade and lots of lots of petrodollars. And this, my friends, is the single most important reason why the Iranian American community will never advance. Iranian Americans are too attached to the old country. The umbilical cord has not yet been cut. Their main focus should be the United States, but it's not. It's Iran.<sup>66</sup>

Then AO chides Iranian Americans for their lack of loyalty to the U.S and goes on to blame Iranian people themselves for the 1979 "devolution" as AO calls it.,

Remember: your American passport is not only for ease of travel to Dubai of your way to Iran for your annual chelo-kabab<sup>67</sup> feasts. You took a loyalty oath to this country that should not be dismissed as "alaki."<sup>68</sup> And you're not "zerang"<sup>69</sup> for becoming U.S. citizens. This country trusted you. Don't betray that trust. Also, remember this: you don't know more than an average American just because you had a "revolution" back in 1979. Look at what that fiasco did to your homeland. If anything, your 1979 devolution is proof positive that you know absolutely nothing about running a country.

The blog article generated 149 total comments, which is on the higher end for the site in the preceding months (but nowhere near the record of 800 to over 1600 comments generated by a few discussion threads in 2009<sup>70</sup>). Among the twenty-two users that posted comments, only a handful (six) agreed with AO's main thesis while others called AO a traitor to Iranians and overly-insulting and accused of "generating propaganda." A good portion of the comments devolved into arguments on specific points between posters that were divided along political fault lines—apologists for the Islamic Republic of Iran, also called "Islamists" by others, those that critique the American "empire" yet

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<sup>66</sup> Posted by Anonymous Observer, September 3, 2012 on Iranian.com

<sup>67</sup> Skewered beef grilled over hot coals

<sup>68</sup> Fake

<sup>69</sup> Clever

<sup>70</sup> See [http://www.iranian.com/main/most\\_discussed\\_2009](http://www.iranian.com/main/most_discussed_2009) for statistics of most discussed from 2009. To my knowledge, this was the only year that Iranian.com posted site statistics.

adamantly against the IRI, others proudly refuse to engage with anything American.

Frashogar, another Iranian.com user, posted a response to AO's article accusing AO of engaging in hate speech.

Ignore all you like. It doesn't change the fact that you and your friends on this website are engaging in clearly identifiable and legally definable **hate-speech** [emphasis in original] against the entire Iranian community, where you and your friends here have even crossed lines into incitement and advocacy of murder countless times. Wrap yourself all you like under transparent criticisms and the flag of the American Empire. When it walks like a duck, quacks like a quack, by golly it is a duck. In any case, I understand you may know a fair bit about ducks too ;-)

Hafez for Beginners, in near agreement with AO, also blamed the issue of lacking a "real voice" on the community's inability to resolve differences,

Anonymous Observer: I agree that the proportion of individual accomplishment doesn't match political representation. Look - I attended one NIAC<sup>71</sup> event and went through hell for it, and chose to cease my membership. No community will survive like that and have a real voice, if they can't put up with differences.

In referencing his attendance of a NIAC event that resulted in fighting and argumentation from the sound of his post, Hafez for Beginners showcases the controversy surrounding both NIAC and a general criticism about Iranian national organizations. Meanwhile, Ayatoilet1<sup>72</sup> presents a completely different alternative to AO's vision of Iranians politically engaged with the American system, mostly because Americans hate Iranians

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<sup>71</sup> NIAC refers to National Iranian American Council, a "nonpartisan nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing the interest of the Iranian-American community" and providing "knowledge and tools" to enable greater civic participation ([http://www.niacouncil.org/site/PageServer?pagename=About\\_index](http://www.niacouncil.org/site/PageServer?pagename=About_index), accessed 29 September 2012). NIAC and its founder and president, Trita Parsi, has been the subject of recent controversy on Iranian.com. One user accused Parsi of "hijacking" the Iranian-American podium, "He has NO place talking for our community in the U.S."

<sup>72</sup> This user name is a pun denigrating the high-ranking title for an expert in Islam "Ayatollah"



and while the U.S. is the best place to remain until the political situation improves, there is no “American dream” for Iranians in the U.S. Ayatoilet1 denigrates those Iranians that attempt to Americanize their names and Iranian identity,

I have been here for 26 years and I still harbor an Iranian Dream - NOT an American Dream.

I do want to go back, and help Iran become a better place. My dream is to help Iran and Iranians advance. I dream of an Iran that can one day host the olympics [sic] or the world cup. An Iran that is associated with other nations in central asia [sic] and a major economic hub. An Iran I can be proud of. An Iran that is a full - worthy citizen of the world. I do not want to be embarrassed [sic] to be Iranian or associated with Iran.

As for America - there are big numbers of people here that hate us. There is no American dream for any Iranian here. They hate muslims [sic]. They hate anything to do with Iran. That is why all Iranians call themselves - Mo, Fred, Sam etc. and hide behind some baseball hat to look more American than Americans themselves.

Why write an article about advancing in America - with NO Iranian basically wants to do that in the long-run. America is simply an escape for the oppression and theocracy in Iran (imposed by the West) on us. No one REALLY wants to be here, they just have to. There is no choice.

The only advancement Iranians want is in the situation in Iran - so they can go back. Why be part of something that doesn't want you to be part of it (i.e. America). I really don't blame Americans - its just the propaganda, and I really think this is a great country and the best place to sit it out - until Iran gets better. Americans are better than Europeans, more decent, less xenophobic[sic] etc. But ultimately don't want Iranians here.

We just have to be realistic and honest with ourselves and our communities. I for one - have an Iranian Dream, NOT an American One.

For Ayatoilet1, in a slight nod to Martin Luther King's famous speech, the “Iranian dream” is a more democratic Iran in which Ayatoilet1 can eventually return when the political situation is fixed. America is the “best place to sit it out” until Iran improves. Where Mohsen attributes the hesitation to participate in U.S. political life to fear of losing one's sense of culture and belonging, for Ayatoilet1, it is sheer refusal. Ayatoilet1's Iranian-ness is irreconcilable with also being American and accepted by other Americans. The discussion incited by Anonymous Observer's post is a startling

look at the diverse spectrum of narratives about the possibilities of political integration and senses of belonging. Users of Iranian.com like Anonymous Observer and Hafez for Beginners see low political participation as evidence that Iranians in the U.S. are rejecting integration into U.S. society (or as AO's accuses them being a "perpetual immigrant who psychologically lives out of a suitcase") which further translates to a lack of voice in the political process. Others like Ayatoilet1 have issue with full integration into U.S. society even being a possibility. Among my informants, political participation in the American context is almost taken for granted, evidencing Ramin's statement that he is not the "median of society."

### **Low Participation in Local Organizations**

In informants' narratives, participating in the American political process is closely associated with being involved with other activities in civic culture and the arts,

Tina                    So what does being involved in a society politically mean to you?  
Ramin                    It means that they they have an opinion, they discuss about politics, they listen to the political, they have political discourse. They have opinion and mostly they vote. If they are citizen they vote. So, in this San Diego, some people say they are thirty-, twenty-five thousand Iranians, but in most of the cultural gatherings, I don't see more than 3,000. So what happened to the other, the rest of the people? They are the people not interested to be involved in a cultural practices. And most likely, most likely they are not interested in politics either. But I have no research on that but this is just my thought.

Citing numbers and estimates of total Iranian population in San Diego versus how many people attend events sponsored by Iranian diaspora organizations was something I heard referenced by at least two other informants. Similar to Ramin, Adnan attributes this difference to being "elite in a cultural way" and "valu[ing] culture,"

Adnan                    For instance, I don't know how many people live in San Diego there are estimates of 40-50,000 right? See how many of them participate in

cultural activities, so that's why I'm saying they are elite. See if there's a nice good cultural activity a band or something Nowruz<sup>73</sup> for instance which is kind of an exception because a lot of people participate, if there's a play, like there was a play last weekend, very interesting play very modern and everything so people who go there are more cultural oriented and uh, so there 200 people showed up, okay so other activity that I see like cultural activity, concerts and stuff, I see 200, 300, 400 people showing up from 40,000 um so it's a small group of them which is culture oriented which is not odd compared to other cultures...

### **Lack of Community and Unity**

In this exchange, Mohsen first refers to Iranians not publicly acknowledging their Iranian identity as a sign of a lack of pride and unity. Then, similar to Adnan, he uses population numbers, but instead makes the point that not enough Iranians in San Diego participate in local Iranian organizations, and therefore this shows a lack of a common purpose and unity.

Mohsen To be more united. Why, why not? We are here the same as the other nations. They have their community, we don't have anything

Tina So, what...

Mohsen The main point was that

Tina Why do you think Iranians aren't united then?

Mohsen You see any unity here?

Tina No, but why, what is the reason you think Iranians aren't united, don't become united?

Mohsen These are, I say, if you see an Iranian here, usually they will not say to you, if you cross an Iranian here in the store, unless you, they talk to each other in Farsi and you find out they're Iranian. But if you face them they will not say that we are Iranians. You know what I mean? They don't want to say that we are Iranians. One of the things that reasons maybe, last night in speech the guy say, maybe because the Iranians are not too welcome here because of the problem between government and, two government. They don't want to, you know, have somewhere, especially shows that Iranians are gathering here. You know what I mean? Maybe that's the reason.

Tina: You think

Mohsen It hasn't happened. But this guy, Dadkha started this AIAP<sup>74</sup> 18 years ago. 18 years ago, after 18 years I think some, they are saying that something

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<sup>73</sup> Iranian New Year celebration taking place the first of spring.

<sup>74</sup> AIAP is a San Diego organization which stands for Association of Iranian-American Professionals.

around 60,000 Iranian people are living in San Diego. And all members are only 300. You know? 60,000 people in San Diego and only we have 300 members.

Tina Mmhm. Well, I don't think, it's not so bad. I think if any, any group

Mohsen It's bad.

Tina Any group would be like that, maybe, I don't know.

Mohsen No, why? 60,000 people!

For Mohsen, the low membership of Iranian organizations like AIAP is symbolic of a lack of community among the Iranian immigrant population in San Diego. He feels that Iranians need to be more united. And in public situations, he wonders why Iranians do not acknowledge each other's presence.

In the virtual community of Iranian.com, the discourse about lack of community surfaces whenever discussions between users begin to break down along religious and political fault lines. Phrases like “whoring for Israel and Bahá'í's” and other similarly bigoted and intolerant ideologies can occur in the same post as accusations of being anti-Iranian, and are obviously meant to incite division. Sometimes such users are reprimanded by other members in a more reasonable tone, as in Hafez for Beginners admonition here referenced earlier,

No community will survive like that and have a real voice, if they can't put up with differences.

Better luck to the next generation - I guess - and I do think those born in the US don't have the baggage and can learn to listen and put up with differences better.

Or, by user Mohammad Ala, in a comment titled from November 12, 2011, “No social responsibility” responding to a series of increasingly insulting posts,

Iranians come from different family backgrounds, they grow up in different parts of Iran, most of them pretend to be religious. Failure of our community demonstrates why we have not been successful (as a group). Many times I have observed ISP members resort to personal attacks to make a point. Is it necessary to criticize someone's picture, name, or

his/her title? I agree this is not limited to Iranians. As I wrote before, we are good in three so-called Rs (math, reading, and writing) but fail big

### **Taking Advantage**

Related to a lack of community is a discourse about Iranians that “take advantage of the system” meaning to take advantage of structures and systems in U.S. society, such as the social security system, Medicare, or the system of granting political asylum. In this passage, Fati talks about people who abuse the political asylum system,

Fati            Because a lot of people who came at the time of [the] Islamic Republic, unfortunately they abused the system. They came as somebody who cannot live in Iran, but then after four years they go back and forth to Iran. You are not political prisoners. I got political asylum in America for [the] last 29 years, 30 years, 32 years. I’ve never been to Iran! Even though I know if I go I can go to Iran but I came here because my life was endangered in India, or going to Iran. So you are abusing that system, and unfortunately they did that in Europe because one of the things, for example, Netherlands was giving to the 7,000 refugees that was in there, and they were not getting permission to stay in Netherlands. It’s because they said that Iran Air is always full of people who are refugees and going to Iran! Which was true! Which was true . . . so they made it harder, but it was never hard to stay. Plus, it’s not only Iranians. There’s a lot of people from different countries, that they come.

In the context of about those willing to “get involved” and those who do not, Afareen makes the following illuminating commentary to draw an analogy between wealthy *bazaari*<sup>75</sup> Iranians in Iran who still support the regime in power to Iranians that vote Republican in the U.S. political party system, while drawing social security checks from the government. Afareen feels it is hypocritical, for example, for people to vote Republican (since she sees that Republicans are usually against entitlement programs) if they are at the same time using fraud to garner checks from social security,

Afareen            Oh yeah. They are ignorant. They are, see I think that in every society you can find those people. Those people that they just live. Just to have, you know, a decent life. And they don't really care who is in the power and what's going on around them. They are so busy with their own life they

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<sup>75</sup> Merchant class

don't even notice what's going on. You can see this in Iran too. All those wealthy bazaar Iranians they don't see how life is hard for the normal, poor, Iranian family. Therefore they don't care. Still they are supporting the regime or so. There are people that really they don't care. Whether Bush is on the power or Obama is on the power as long [their] social security check is in the mail they are happy. Who cares? It is very very interesting when you talk to these Iranians, some of them that they get this benefit or so. They are supporting the Republicans and when you talk to them and say, "how you can, you are getting all these checks from where? From government that the democrats set all this for you." But they are Republican or they are against the -

Tina They're against the help, or what other people call the welfare system. Or you know social welfare?

Afareen Or they don't mind at all. And then it bothers me really. There are people that they come and they use all the benefit. And they are, on the other hand, they are Iranians that they came from first day they work like a dog here, they pay taxes or so, and they don't have health insurance like our friend. Poor woman. Three kids, came here, educated those kids or so. Still doesn't have health insurance. Because she works hard and she gets the money -

Tina So what's the difference between your friend and the people that, from what you're saying, kind of take advantage of the system?

Behnaz Different from what point of view? The difference is basically there are people who are willing to make a contribution to society. And there are people who are takers.

Behnaz Take advantage -

Afareen This country they think they owe them. They owe them. No.

Tina But where does that mentality come from, I guess is what I'm asking.

Afareen From the Iranian mentality pretty much.

Behnaz It comes from the lack of ethics in a way. Because ethical people would have some values. Some principles. To adhere to. And in this country, if you go on interview, average senior citizens they are having tough time surviving. Because social security money is hardly enough to pay for their medicine, their supplemental health. *These* people come, they have money, they have brought money. But they hide the money with their children. But their taking advantage of the government. That is not ethical. That is taking advantage of the country. And *these* were the people who were also responsible for the chaos in Iran. Because look, I don't care in which society you are. If you have the responsibility you feel like I am responsible to the society that has given me so much. That I'm not going to take advantage of this. I'm going to make a contribution. I'm going to work. I'm going to make a difference in society, no matter what it is. But a lot of people, and all the time you hear them doing this kind of things. And not only that, sometimes it is unfortunate to hear that there's some medical doctor who has overbilled Medicare. I mean these are not ethical people. And it ruins the reputation of the Iranians.

Afareen See this kid came as a refugee, as a Bahá'í<sup>76</sup>. He could not study in Iran and go further. From the third week he had to work [hard] to pay off the ticket money that they gave him. I really admire him.

Behnaz Yeah that's the way it should be. You know, because -

Afareen They came as a refugee like everybody else. But he never took advantage, take advantage of the system.

Behnaz I think American people are good people. Really they are wonderful people. Otherwise they would *hate* all the foreigners. Because of what they do here. If you take average people that they have come to America, not only they don't make a contribution, they are actually *dow-ghort-u-neem-esh-baghi*<sup>77</sup>

Afareen *Talabkar*<sup>78</sup>

Behnaz What you call talabkar. They are entitlement. Entitlement-minded. "Government should pay me! *Ho-ghough-eh man bad bedam.*"<sup>79</sup>, *Che ghough-i?*<sup>80</sup> You didn't work here two days!

Tina (laughing)

Behnaz *Che-ghough-i?* Why because United [States] government owes you anything? See these are the things sometimes it gives a bad name like I, to Iranians. And I'm not saying that other people in this country they don't do the same but I don't care about other people. I care about my people. I care about people that I want to be associated with. I want to be able to say proudly, "I am Iranian".

Their particular dialogue shows some interesting patterns. The notion of “not being involved” in politics is on a cognitive level related to larger ideas about ethics, what constitutes responsible behavior toward host society, perceptions about the links to homeland events, notions about giving back, concerns about reputation amongst Americans, and even political party ideology. If I were to diagram the themes highlighted and the flow of conversation above between Behnaz, Afareen, and I, it might look like this:

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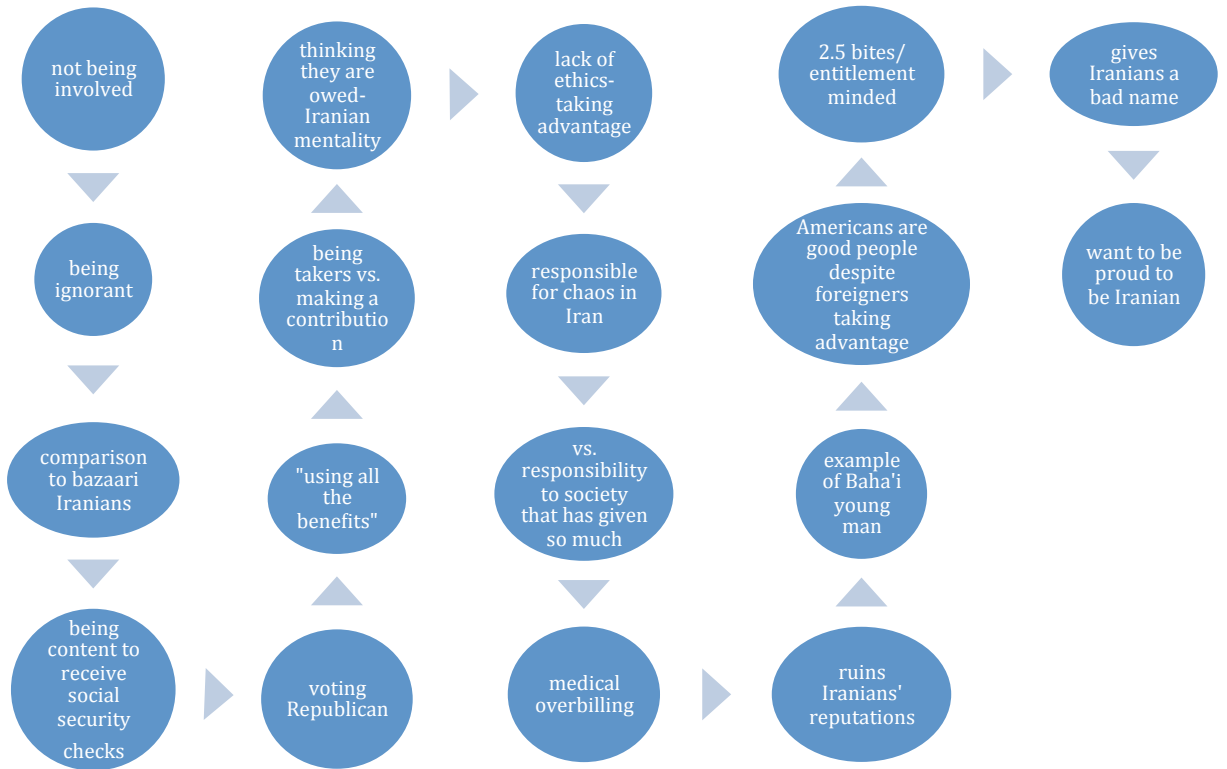
<sup>76</sup> Afareen is referencing a young man and family friend that was visiting their home that evening and had lived with them for a period of time after he migrated to the U.S.

<sup>77</sup> A phrase that roughly translates to a person that feels they are owed “two-and-half more bites”.

<sup>78</sup> A person that is owed something, or in the usage here, entitlement-minded

<sup>79</sup> “They have to give me my monthly pay!” *Ho-ghough* refers to monthly pay/salary received from the government or a company.

<sup>80</sup> “What monthly pay?”



**Figure 5** Diagram of conversational flow and themes related to “taking advantage” and “not being involved” in Afareen’s and Behnaz’s interview

In another dialogue we have together, Afareen acknowledges that it is her Bahá’í faith as a belief system that drives her to participate in so many civic organizations and spend time volunteering, “In my faith service is the worship. Therefore if we can be help in any way to anybody or so, why not?” Behnaz, on the other hand, more directly connects it to the idea of giving back to society, “The way I look at my life particularly this country has given me so much and this is my way of putting a little bit back into the society. In any way I can. If I can make a contribution I can make a difference.”

These concerns expressed by informants about a) political involvement, b) low levels of participation in Iranian diaspora organizations, c) overall lack of a sense of community and, d) taking advantage are raised in these narratives together in a discourse about participation and belonging in American society. They were interwoven in



informants' narratives and online through virtual communities, as well as something I heard expressed to me as a participant in these organizations, such as when a board president agreeing with the writer Firoozeh Dumas' admonishment to fellow Iranians that they needed to volunteer more in American society<sup>81</sup>. Moreover the discourse speaks to the formation of a distinct Iranian-American civic culture. It is distinct because it references the unique political history of Iran and Iranian categories of self-responsibility, personhood, and the components of communalism. Further these discourses are a product of individual life course and collective experience with regime change in Iran. In the next section, I move from what informants said about their own participation in politics and civic life to the actual activities they partake in.

### ***A Typology of Iranian Immigrant Political and Civic Activity***

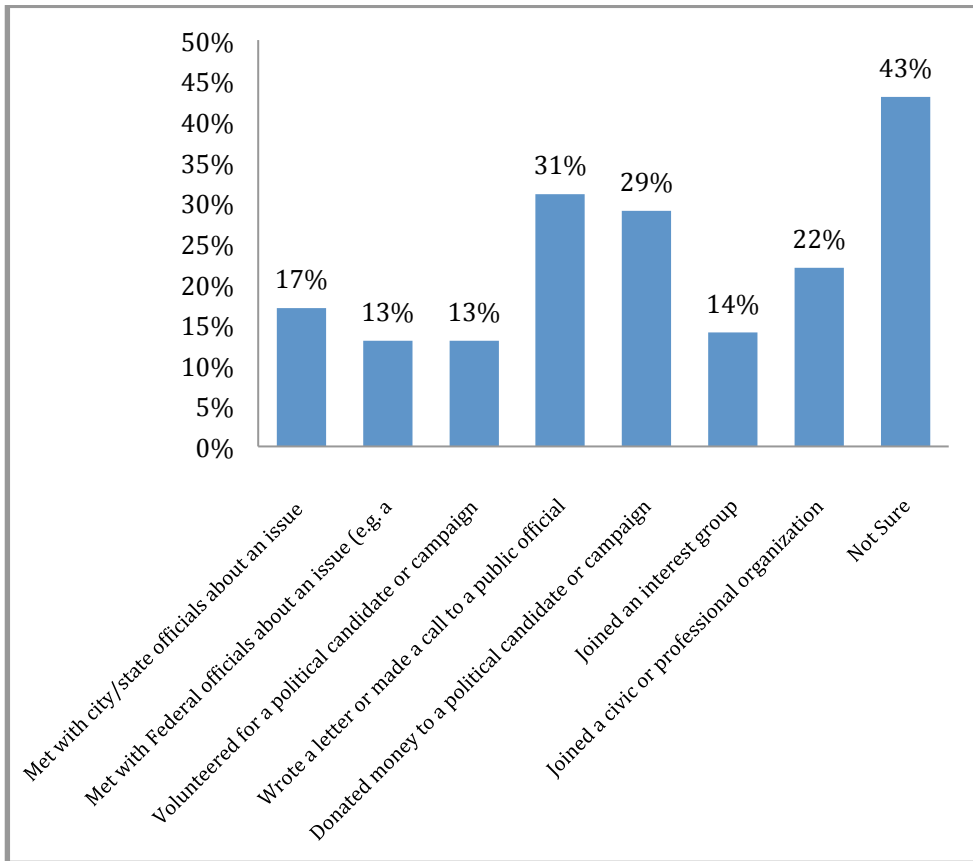
In comparison to the prevalent discourses about under-participation, survey results actually differ. PAAIA cites a 2004 survey which indicated that sixty-eight percent (68%) of Iranians voted in national elections (PAAIA 2008). This is in contrast to 55.7% of the total U.S. voting age population voting in the Presidential election and 51.6% voting in the election for U.S. Representatives during the same time period (2004), with the highest percentages of voting in 2008 with 57.1% of the population casting a ballot in the Presidential election<sup>82</sup>. The 2008 PAAIA survey<sup>83</sup> specifically asked respondents about their participation in political and civic life, with the prompt "Have you ever done the following?"

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<sup>81</sup> Memoirist Firoozeh Dumas was one of the presenters for Passing the Torch of Success in San Diego.

<sup>82</sup> U.S Census Bureau. Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2012. "Elections." Electronic document, <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0397.pdf>, accessed October 15, 2012.

<sup>83</sup> For the 2008 PAAIA survey, n= 401. The respondents were randomly drawn from purchased Iranian surname lists of approximately 30,000 people.



**Figure 5 Iranian American Participation in Political and Civic Life from 2008 PAAIA Survey**

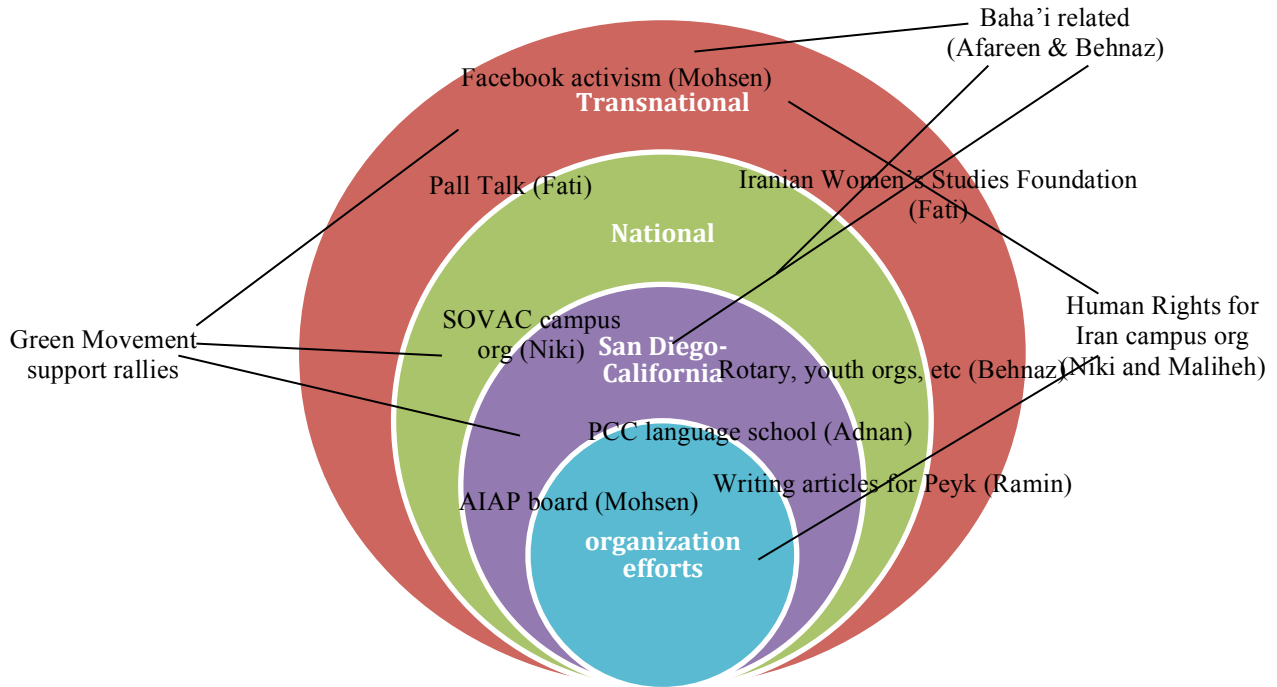
The results, presented in Figure 5, show remarkable levels of civic/political participation among Iranian immigrants in comparison to U.S. population overall<sup>84</sup>. This might be partially explained by higher levels of education and income among Iranian immigrants in general. A 2012 report commissioned by the Educational Testing Service found increasing stratification, what they called the “civic empowerment gap,” between those with higher income levels and education in the U.S. For instance the voting rate for high school dropouts is 38%, less than half the rate of those with advanced degrees, and

<sup>84</sup> It is difficult to find one comprehensive source that has the same comparable data for U.S. population. One non-profit, Americans for Campaign Reform, for example, cites that 4% of Americans made contributions of any amount in 2008. (<http://www.acrreform.org/research/money-in-politics-who-gives/>, accessed 2 October 2012). Compare this to 29% of Iranian Americans (for any time period).

more than 90% of individuals in households earning \$100,000 or more vote, while only 52% of individuals in the lowest income households vote (Coley 2012). In the PAAIA survey, the “Not Sure” category at 43% is questionable because it is a fairly high percentage. What their definition of an interest group might be is also unknown--we do not know whether interest groups encompass political causes or organizations, and further which entity do they reference (i.e. local municipality, state, U.S., or Iran). Most importantly, however, the 2008 PAAIA survey results do not corroborate the prevailing discourse among informants, or the sentiment expressed online. Comparing the assumption among informants and in online narratives to the 2008 PAAIA survey results, the issue becomes, therefore, a question of perception and expectation in the lived experiences and narratives of informants. What is to explain this difference? While these national surveys provide an overall framework for beginning to understand civic and political participation, they offer only one slice of data at a particular point in time in the respondent’s life, using narrower definitions of civic/political activity, with the reference point solely being the U.S. Under the impetus to follow and find the places where political discourse ensues as the overriding research question, I present here a typology of political action encountered during fieldwork among my Iranian migrant informants, and through virtual ethnography.

Using a life course perspective, political and civic action does take on a diversity of forms in the lived experiences of my informants, and the “targets” and intentions vary in each. What patterns do we see across and between local (San Diego) and extra-local (U.S., Iran, transnational movements, etc.) goals? While the purpose of this section is to list and describe all of the forms of political and civic action encountered during

fieldwork, we need to keep in mind the simultaneity and overlapping nature of these activities. For instance, in the case of the Green Movement support rally, San Diego is the local sphere in which it takes place and its aims are primarily to make local residents take notice and support the cause, yet the larger goal is regime change in Iran. Figure 6 diagrams some of these efforts as a series of nested spheres.



**Figure 6** Diagram “Mapping” Civic and Political Activities among Informants

This diagram somewhat corresponds to Sheffer’s (2003: 173-174) formulation of how diaspora communities function on five levels in politics: the domestic level in host country, the regional level, the trans-state level, the level of the entire diaspora, and the level of homeland politics. However, as figure 6 shows, some efforts potentially reside in more than one sphere, such as Human Rights for Iran (HRI). HRI is both a campus group that aims to politicize and instruct fellow university students but also aligns itself to the Green Movement in Iran and its transnational support.

### **Green Movement Political Rallies<sup>85</sup>**

Generally, participating in a political rally or demonstration was isolated to the local solidarity demonstrations for the Green Movement<sup>86</sup> that took place in the summer of 2009 in front of the Federal courthouse building in downtown San Diego or Balboa Park, which is a large public park and communal gathering space in central San Diego. Rallies were taking place on a weekly basis during the height of the turmoil. A new group was organized, called IranPeace, the led the organizing efforts. I attended one of its rallies, which took place in front of the federal courthouse building in downtown San Diego, February 20, 2011 in support of two university students murdered by the Iranian government.<sup>87</sup> This particular protest was meant to correspond with worldwide protests around February 11-14, 2011 called “The Day of Rage”. February 11 coincides with the 22<sup>nd</sup> day of the month of Bahman on the Iranian calendar, which in 2011 was the 32<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the Iranian Revolution.



**Figure 7 Photo, Green Movement supporters in San Diego waving banners and flags, Feb 20, 2011**

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<sup>85</sup> Please also refer to Appendix 3: Case Study: Reactions to June 2009 and Feelings about Green Movement through Time.

<sup>86</sup> Initially, the Green Movement’s goals were an annulment of the June 2009 election. Broadly, the Green Movement was/is striving for reform in the regime, not necessarily a revolution to overthrow the regime.

<sup>87</sup> Though, I did not find any direct mention of the group name before or during the rally



**Figure 8 Photo, San Diego protestors holding up posters of murdered university students, Feb 20, 2011**

Attendees specifically invoked the political revolution overthrowing Egypt’s President Mubarak in their chants, “Cairo first, Tehran next!.” The local 22 Bahman protest rally highlights the transnational nature of the Green Movement political support by the Iranian diaspora. As Sia, the founder of Human Rights for Iran, told me “No protests there, No protests here.”<sup>88</sup> This was a partial explanation for my enquiry to him about why the activity seemed to significantly die down after 2009.

As far as I can track, this group dissolved or became inactive by 2012. A statement dated July 13, 2009 from their website lays out the composition and purpose of the group,

We are a committee of Iranian-American volunteers who support democracy, freedom and human rights in Iran. Our diverse group includes student representatives, concerned citizens and other activists who have been working to support the human rights of Iranians. We have volunteered to help facilitate peaceful demonstrations in San Diego and are not connected to any political groups or organizations.

The overall goals of IranPeace was 1) political transparency and participatory democracy in Iran, calling for a nullification of the election results; 2) freedom of speech and

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<sup>88</sup> Personal conversation, May 16, 2011.

peaceful assembly in Iran, condemning the use of force against Iranian protesters; and 3) human rights in Iran. They also requested no flags be allowed at demonstrations because of the contested history and divisive nature of the Iranian flag<sup>89</sup>.

The organizers can not [sic] favor any particular group over the others. If all groups bring their own flags, we increase the potential for tension and damage to the unity that we need at this time. We should set aside our differences and unite over what we have in common. Our main task is to echo the voices of those in Iran who are struggling for their basic human rights. Therefore, we respectfully ask you to refrain from bringing any flags.<sup>90</sup>

Yet this strategy did not work to foster unity among rally participants. As Fati, one of my informants recalled, protestors evidenced their internal divisions by standing on opposite street corners,

This was all [of] the Iranian that gathered there. Iran Peace was organizing it. And then, Iran Peace formed after that. This was in the first – second week when I came back. And then, I knew some of the people who were pro-*Mujahedin-e Khalq*<sup>91</sup>, and I knew some people in the society who are really now, like *satanat*, pro-Shah's regime. And they were standing in one corner, and some people were standing in [an]other corner, and the rest of the people [were] standing in one corner. Like, a huge number of people in one corner.

So, I knew something [was] wrong. I told my co-worker, "No, I changed my mind, I'm going to go back to work." So I went back to work, and the next day I called and asked my friend, "What happened? How come not everybody was together? I noticed a couple of people I know from Mujahedin and a couple of Shah's regime were on the other side of the street.

As one of the organizers for IranPeace, Adnan, was surprised at the number of people who showed up for some of the rallies "...usually don't see them anywhere, politically or otherwise..." and attracted people who had never been in a demonstration before.

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<sup>89</sup> The current flag of the Islamic Republic adopted in 1980 represents in stylized script the word for "God" and replaces the flag that had been in place until that time which features a lion and a sun in the center. The Lion and Sun flag is used by Iranian communities abroad as a symbol of their opposition to the government.

<sup>90</sup> Accessed 26 June 2012. "About Us" [http://iranpeace2009.org/?page\\_id=2](http://iranpeace2009.org/?page_id=2)

<sup>91</sup> See glossary.

Further, these rallies were a point of inter-generational interaction, and at times inter-generational conflict over differences in political opinion.

Adnan I mean we grew up with demonstrations, revolts and from Tehran University to all the way, I mean it was just natural for us. That's why we had to explain, so that there were a lot of kids that were newer students and stuff, they were getting involved but they were "Oh, we gotta do this," and I said, ok now, there are ways of doing this, and this is the way, so we tried to basically help them to get organized and that organization at University X\* that kind of formed

Tina HRI?\*<sup>92</sup>

Adnan Yeah, by few activist[s] and we were working together with them and of course, it wasn't easy because you know the group there think that they were not monolithic and there were expectation and their thought about, outlook and everything was different

Tina Than yours?

Adnan Everyone that it was that peace group, they had different expectation different attitude, some of them were saying we should not support Mousavi what so ever, and these are just bunch of criminals like the other ones and there were people who were just fanatic about Mousavi and who really believe in Mousavi and that he is the guy and he is the messiah, you know, so that was the spectrum.

The political spectrum participating in the rallies included the "far left and the far right". While the San Diego Green Movement support rallies and demonstrations taking place in the summer of 2009 had the intention of solidarity and unification among the Iranian diaspora community, it had the reverse effect of becoming a moment of tension and conflict. As Mitra, an early informant reported from her participation in these 2009 rallies, "That's why I am so disappointed not everyone is on the same side. The ultimate goal is the same but the route is so different. When the things were really heated, and see a demonstration. One on side is monarchists, nationalists, religious elements, nationalists. Even among small groups a divide. It's rather discouraging."

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<sup>92</sup> Replaced actual acronym with pseudonymic acronym



## **Activist Organizations**

An “activist organization” here is one that primarily defines itself as supporting some kind of political or social recognition and change. An example is the northern-California based group United4Iran ([www.United4Iran.org](http://www.United4Iran.org)) I know about this organization only through their website and learned of it after someone posted about an upcoming event on HRI’s Facebook feed, which works to raise awareness of human rights abuses in Iran and mobilize pressure on the Iranian government to uphold the principles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

With respect to other activist organizations, Fati among the first generation, actively works for the promotion of Iranian women’s rights and equality through the Iranian Women’s Studies Foundation (IWSF) which she has been involved with for years. Among the second generation, Niki is involved with student voter rights and registration. Seeing the power of the vote denied after the June 2009 election in Iran motivates her participation with SOVAC. The idea of “being visible” to politicians to hold them accountable is something she does want to take for granted in the U.S., because of her experience with the political situation in Iran,

Niki            Well, it, for SOVAC, the idea of voter, like the power of a vote really resonates with me because of my background with Iran and being in Iran during the elections and seeing the issues that come with fraudulent votes. And, it kind of opened my eyes to how valuable a person's vote is. And, I think that gets really overlooked here in this country because it's always been there. And, it's something that we've taken for granted which is completely expected because were born into it. And, when the executive director of SOVAC approached me and told me about this philosophy, that's just what really resonated with me. And, I wanted to be involved in some kind of group that re-introduces the value of a vote to the student. And, and just the idea of being visible to politicians and reminding politicians who they are supposed to be representing, is also something that really resonates with me because of my background in global politics and human rights.

Also second generation Iranians are the members of Human Rights for Iran<sup>93\*</sup> (HRI) a student group at a state public university, considers itself an activist organization. HRI plans events with other activist organizations on campus. Though HRI specifically advocates for the promotion for civil rights in Iran, it sometimes joins with other groups that support various other causes. However, HRI sees itself in solidarity with these groups. Their most visible activism takes the form of planned events for the university publics which are intended to educate and motivate.

An event titled “Hijabs and Hoodies, Part I, Candlelight Vigil” took place April 4, 2012 and was co-organized by members of HRI. The organizers linked several recent hate crime murders together, including the killing of Trayvon Martin, a young 17 year old African American male who was shot while walking down the street in a gated community in Florida. Organizers conceptually linked the shooting of Martin to the death of Shaima Alawadi, a 32-year old Muslim mother of five found killed in her living room in El Cajon, California (a suburb community of San Diego) with a note next to her saying “Go back to your country terrorist.,” as well as another young unarmed African American male Kendrec Lavelle McDade, aged 19, shot and killed in Pasadena. The student organizers wanted to draw attention to these deaths and put public pressure to classify them as hate crimes. Organizers wrote in the Facebook description of the event,

These are three occurrences, of thousands that occur throughout our country and across time, based on race and hatred. We acknowledge that these are hate crimes, and would like for you to join us in this vigil to honor these three innocent victims, who lost their lives.

Another event titled “Break the Chains: The Plight of Political Prisoners” took place May 8, 2012. HRI members joined together with other activist oriented groups on

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<sup>93</sup> Data for this comes from participant observation and their Facebook group page, of which I am a member.

campus such Students for Justice in Palestine, Books for Prisoners and the Student Sustainability Collective. The president of HRI at the time provided the event details on Facebook and urged members to print out an 8x11 photo copy of a current political prisoner in Iran to take to the event, and “stand in solidarity with our fellow students, professors, lawyers, engineers and people of Iran unjustly imprisoned.” Clearly part of the mission of these campus events is to inform and educate other students, since the event description reads, “What is a political prisoner? A political prisoner is a [sic] individual who is detained on the basis that they have opposed or criticized the ruling government.”

Overall, it is difficult to gauge the relative importance of participation in activist organizations as compared to other forms. Most informants did not report alliances or actively supporting such other movements stateside. As an exception, Behnaz and Afareen consider their deep involvement with the Bahá’í religion and bringing public and widespread recognition to the plight of Bahá’ís in Iran, as activism on behalf of their faith.

### **Iranian Voluntary Organizations (EGBO) Participation**

One of the issues that came up in my conversations with informants during the course of collecting life histories was a discomfort with applying the term “activist” to themselves. In some cases, the discomfort was mine, not wanting to presume too much about how they viewed their activities. In other cases, the discomfort was theirs—maybe implying a kind of strident, militant activism that did not match the reality of their practices. While they advocated for change in Iran, to be seriously involved in such endeavors has life threatening implications. To be honest, I started applying the word

activist to my study without giving too much thought to its implications. My internal working definition was “a person who was active in a political to civic organization or in a political or civic capacity.” It helped that the people who participated were often leaders in such organizations. In reality I posit Iranian organizations (what I have been calling ethnic grassroots based organization or EGBO) at the nexus of transnational political action and civic engagement. In informants’ narratives, the importance of EGBOs is taken for granted as their selection to my sample was entirely dependent on their participation in such organizations. It does pop up at certain times, when Ramin for example sees a direct link between his participation in EGBOs, “valuing culture” and political participation, referred to in a previous section. Mohsen provides another example, of why he sees local Iranian organizations as important to information flow similar to the way his Facebook activism provides for the flow of information. His overall sentiment can be expressed as “They have their own community, we don’t have anything” when he compares Iranians to other ethnic groups in the area,

Mohsen        The thing is, why, I was interested, because ...one of the Iranian communities here, organizations that are gathering Iranian people giving information to them. The main point is the gathering and next point for me is the information here. Because here the information flows, anybody can find it. But, gathering of them, know each other more, have a monthly meeting, they have monthly meeting, they come over introduce to each other. I think that it's good for the community, find community here in the United States to have each other. It's not in Iranian. If you go to other nations you can see for yourself, but if you go to this. Vietnamese come here they can easily find the job in this nail shops which are all the same people.

It seems what Mohsen is trying to say is that other immigrant populations have an easier time finding compatriots. He feels this is not the case for Iranians. Therefore, finding community and reclaiming identity is the other purpose of local diaspora organizations

For Ramin, EGBO provided an opportunity for migrants to expand their social network and participate in something bigger than them,

Ramin            The democratic... yes and also they gave people identity at the time that they lost their identity. And we came from the country we lost our identity, we left everything back home...and at that time we didn't have any Iranian store, we didn't have any Iranian restaurant, we didn't know where to go. The weekends we were just sitting home or you know inviting our close family, but then we decided to have Friday nights night of poetry, twenty six seven years ago we started a night of poetry... we started with five people and we ended up with 800 people...

Tina              So the purpose of them giving them an hour was what? Can you talk about that some more?

Ramin            They were a part of the immigrants so you should you should you should realize that the first wave of immigrants from Iran they were all elites....the you know high professions, psychologists doctors surgeons, engineers. They were the first wave of immigrants, okay...so when we came here, it was easy to find one of those psychologists that who immigrated here also to tell us how to cope....With this new life. Okay. So that was the main core of those nights of poetry. And we had we had all these that they come out they come and play for free. We had poets that they came out read their poetry. We had writers we had you know thinkers....you know all sort of people, they had a chance to express themselves, and on the other side, people had a place to fill up their Friday night. So they assimilated with each other, they found identity.

Similarly, Fabos (2002) found that Sudanese NGOs in Cairo have been important for a cross-section of Sudanese in Cairo to recover some of their class and professional status lost through the migration process.

My research shows that ethnic grassroots-based organization (EGBO), though they work to serve local members' needs, help acculturate members to U.S. society, plan cultural festivals, etc. do in fact coalesce interests and members to work at multiple levels (local, national, transnational). EGBO are civic organizations that provide a foundation to work in the political realm. Additionally, Iranian organizations in San Diego provide perhaps one the few forums where Iranians from different religious backgrounds, classes, ethnicities and generation interact. EGBOs are the crux in which the personal political

and communitarian political hinge, meaning that EGBO are the place where group level and individual level political action merge and emanate, as Figure 9 illustrates. Members may join EGBO initially to serve personal needs, but from this they begin to engage with other kinds of political/civic practice.

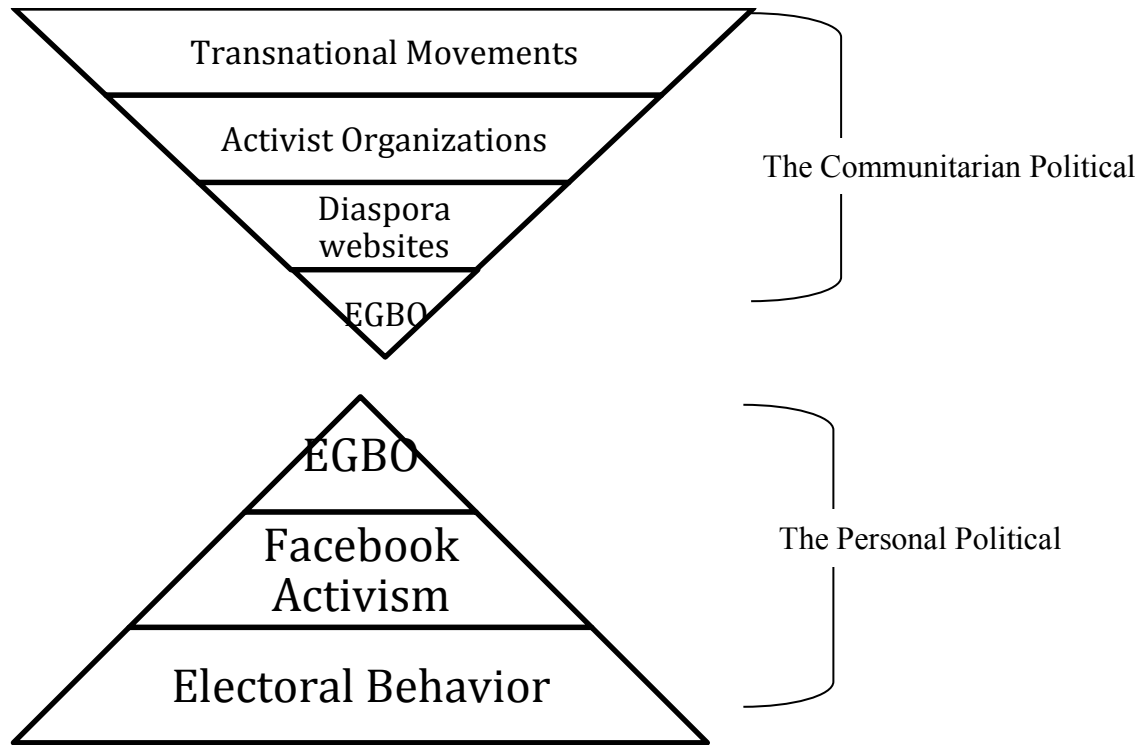


Figure 9 Diagram, Voluntary organizations as the “crux” between personal and community-level political/civic action

I found that diaspora community organizations and individuals are keyed in together in a mutual re-enforcing politicization. Andersen (2008) asserts that community organizations often serve as the primary vehicle for political incorporation, a role which was once played by the major political parties. Organizations not only provide an opportunity for engaging with civic culture, and politics, but I found that these EBGOS provided a way to Iranian immigrants to “practice and learn” civic culture and democracy, “tolerate each other,” and “growing up” through these organizations-- a theme that came up repeatedly in informants’ narratives. The emergence of an Iranian

immigrant civil society in the past 25 years or so since the establishment of local EGBOs has given space to consider what a new and more democratic Iran might be like.

### **Facebook Activism**

The term “Facebook Activism” has made its way into the Urban Dictionary, albeit in a sarcastic manner, “The illusion of dedication to a cause through no-commitment awareness groups.”<sup>94</sup> There is an increasing sense that Facebook activism is a poor barometer of actual commitment to causes. Yet there is also a proliferation of how-to guides and manuals for organizers to take advantage of Facebook’s widespread use around the globe, no cost for organizing, and facile ways to make use of multi-media tools. The manual, *A DigiActive Introduction to Facebook Activism* (Schultz 2008), is an example of such an effort. The author of the guide views Facebook as a great way to increase awareness and mobilize people. However, Mary Joyce, co-founder of DigiActive.org, commented on the low bar of entry for Facebook groups and activism in a 2009 article, “Maybe a maximum of 5 percent are going to take action, and maybe it's closer to 1 percent... In most cases of Facebook groups, members do nothing. I haven't yet seen a case where the Facebook group has led to a sustained movement.”<sup>95</sup>

There was indeed an explosion of Facebook groups during the height of the 2009 Iranian election crisis and protests, including some devoted to a young woman protester

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<sup>94</sup> The Urban Dictionary is a popular web-based dictionary of slang words and phrases. “Facebook Activism” Electronic document, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Facebook%20Activism>, accessed 2 October 2012

<sup>95</sup> Hesse, Monica. “Facebook Activism: Lots of Clicks, but Little Sticks” Washington Post, July 2, 2009. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp\\_dyn/content/article/2009/07/01/AR2009070103936.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp_dyn/content/article/2009/07/01/AR2009070103936.html), accessed 2 October 2012.

This presents an interesting point for future research—how the digital activism first used during Iran’s Green Movement influenced or is related to digital activism during the so-called Arab Spring of 2011.

named Neda Agha Soltani, killed by gunfire during one of the Tehran protests. The image of Neda's face lying in the streets quickly became an icon of the Green Movements protests and circulated around the world. Whereas the great majority of Facebook activism involves little effort on the part of the user or does not translate to sustained movement, this is not always the case.

For Mohsen, his Facebook activism comes not from clicking "like" on particular groups, but through news and information-related posts. These posts on his Facebook wall are real-time connection to events happening in Iran, and he sees the impact of his posts when friends and relatives in Iran thank him for disseminating news and information that they might otherwise not be aware of. He does concede that these efforts may be small, but sees it as contributing overall to regime change in Iran,

Mohsen I can say that. I can say that because I was worried. I always loved to something happened in Iran that change the regime. But I was never doing anything about it. And still I'm not doing anything. But the only thing I can do is post these things in on Facebook. You know, those days on Facebook some people were changing their names to I don't know, Mohsen Irani, Mohsen Tehrani, they don't give their pictures, don't give their information. Mine I didn't change it. From the first day still is the same thing. My name and family. And I'm posting. The only thing I am doing is the posting the news I'm receiving. Posting there to, for the people who are interested in it. And, just wish that it helps and it brings another person to the, to this , to think it, to think and to act. I am not there. If I was there maybe I was more active. But here whatever I can do is that. And yes I get more active in political issues when I, when this happens in Iran. Give me some hope that something can happen in Iran, regime can change in Iran. It's not a dream. It can be done. Maybe takes time, but can be done.

Besides creating, joining, or liking a group that supports a specific cause, and posting news/information for the benefit of others without access to such sources, I observed other types of online activism especially as part of HRI's Facebook group page. They maintain two separate walls, a closed one and a public one. The public one has



significantly more activity in the form of posts and comments, and I did not notice that the closed HRI group wall had significantly different content that might be labeled as secret. My sense was the closed group was deemed “secret” primarily to restrict and control membership<sup>96</sup>, and not necessarily for content. It is important to distinguish that HRI is a group that exists beyond its Facebook group incarnation. HRI is in actuality, as described elsewhere, a student-led university-based organization that uses Facebook to communicate with members, disseminate information, and coordinate events and meetings.

HRI’s group page extends the reach and effort of their organization. For example, what is posted on Facebook and discussed is actually broader than what transpires at meetings, such as the following effort posted on their public Facebook wall May 2, 2012, by the president of the organization.

Hot off the presses! A wonderful campaign for all Iranians, Iranian Americans, and Americans to join hands against the possible war Iran. Everyone "Like" the page <https://www.facebook.com/4MinutesToPreventWarWithIran> and take a few seconds to write a letter expressing your feelings to Michelle Obama. Together we will be heard.

The president also announced that individual letters were going to be written during the next meeting and urged members to share the effort on Facebook, and reminded members that “the cause is bigger than any one of us but together we will be the legs that life the slumbering giant.” This particular initiative was first introduced online through the group’s Facebook page, and seemingly completed at a meeting. The most frequent kind of posts comes in the form of links to headlines and news stories from major journalistic

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<sup>96</sup> The closed or “secret” group has 42 members on Facebook, while the public group has more than double that at 114 members. The closed HRI group has been increasingly inactive. There were no news posts between May 30 and September 22, 2012, for example. The public HRI group registers a bit more activity in comparison.

outlets, trending topics like Iran banning university women from certain courses, the effects of U.S. sanctions, and the jailed U.S. hikers. Over the one year I tabulated posts, the news stories of interest include posts related to the anti-war on Iran movement (7 posts), the detrimental effect of U.S. sanctions on the citizens of Iran (4 posts), the political situation in Syria (2), for example.

One of the more important functions of Facebook for HRI is to publicize their special events (movie screenings, rallies, lectures, etc). Among the political rallies posted on Facebook include an University of California-system wide rally for Syria, a candlelight vigil for victims of hate crimes, and a Los Angeles event sponsored by Democracy in Action which called for “No war on Iran” and against foreign intervention in Iran, and a lesser commented event post related to another event in Los Angeles about the oppression of the Bahá’í Faith.

Posting links to online petitions for certain causes, such as the anti-war with Iran effort, was yet another use of HRI’s Facebook wall. Online petitions “compete” in an environment on HRI’s Facebook page already crowded with news information and calls for action, such as YouTube videos, political rallies, documentary movie screenings, etc. Additionally, Niki, among my informants specifically counted signing and forwarding online petitions among her political activities.

Facebook as a social networking site is one arena where political activity takes place—on the individual level through Mohsen who sees Facebook as a useful tool to advance regime change in Iran, and on the group level through HRI. While Facebook is a useful medium to disseminate information and bring together like-minded people to participate in political and social causes, and to perhaps “introduce” topics for

consideration by users and members, it was not utilized for any *engaged* discussion of political topics that I observed. In other words, Facebook was used as a tool of civic engagement but not as a locale for political discourse. Political discourse in an online format actually takes place in other forums, like Iranian.com.

Even though I did not see any evidence of online petitions or calls for rallies and protests being shared on Iranian.com, the other venue where I conducted virtual ethnography, Iranian.com (IC) was an incredibly rich source for engaged, lengthy, and oftentimes heated political discussion. This in fact speaks to the diversity of ways that the internet can not only create “community”, but the multiplicity of ways that people can engage in politics online through virtual communities. Part of the explanation in their different uses lies in the different formats of Facebook as a social networking site and Iranian.com as a self-described community website for the diaspora and the “rules of engagement” for each.

### **Diaspora Websites as Sites for Political Discourse**

Throughout this study, I have referred to content from Iranian.com. The purpose of this section is to elaborate on the characteristics of the discourse encountered on Iranian.com and posit it as a “diaspora website.” According to Michel Laguerre a digital diaspora is “An immigrant group or descendant of an immigrant populations that uses IT connectivity to participate in virtual networks of contacts for a variety of political, economic, social, religious, and communicational purposes that, for the most part, may concern either the homeland, the host land, or both, including its own trajectory abroad,” (2010:50).

To determine how closely the activity on Iranian.com is linked to Iranian news, I used the site archives to tabulate the number of posts by month and year. Site archives are

not available before July 2007. As might be predicted, the summer of 2009 during the height of the post-election drama in Iran shows the highest number of posts. July (1859), June (1724), and August (1580) of 2009 constitute the three highest monthly totals for posts in the five-year period where archives are available, in that order. This is followed by December 2009 and September 2009. Excluding 2007, when the site was first going interactive (thus the number of posts are artificially low), June, July, August and December (in that order) have the highest monthly averages from 2008-2010, as the graph below shows.

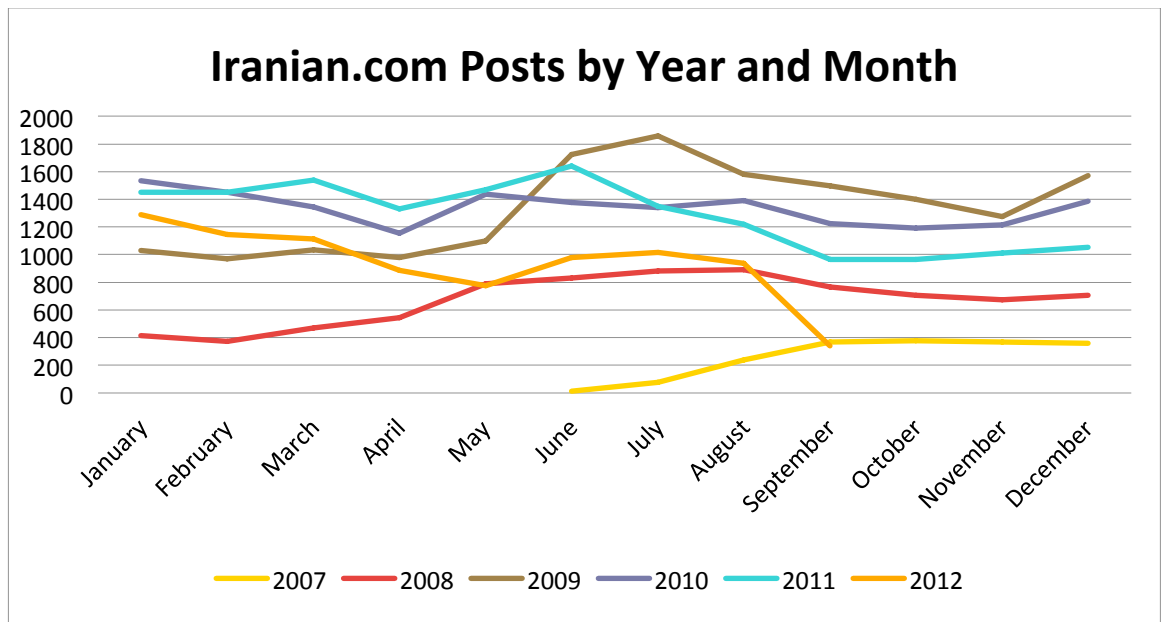


Figure 10 Graph, Iranian.com Post by Year and Month

For this chart, I tabulated most number of posts since that is what the site itself uses.

Whereas my informants in San Diego assured me that differences in political ideologies were never a big issue in social situations, meyhmooni, or during meetings, users on IC on the other hand use the forum to seriously discuss their position and try to

convince others of the rightness of their view. The general finding is that online political discourse is much more strident and divisive than is heard and experienced in face-to-face life. IC is certainly a community, with dissent and disagreement at its core. After a bit of time you get to know the personalities involved. It is instructive to hear some news about Iran in mainstream media, and then to go check on Iranian.com to gauge how the news is being received and analyzed by the Iranian diaspora community. Online political discourse here, besides a propensity to being insulting or even bigoted at times, consists of ardent declarations of specific political programs and ideologies that turn into animated debates in many instances. This commentary by user Esfand Aashena posted September 14, 2012 is an example. Esfand Aashena takes issues with others insulting Islam, at the same time pointing out the ineffectiveness of their insults in regime change,

Agents of Outrage. So I turn to those who insult Islam routinely on this website and refer to Muslims (directly or indirectly) as savages and Muhammad as a pedophile and so on, dirt on your heads! NONE of your insults on this website has ever been able to incite anything in Iran! ALL of the protests in Iran have been because of insults of non-Iranians!

Or, this comment by user Darius Kadiver on September 4, 2012, who clearly articulates his pro-monarchy stance,

I'm a Monarchist Period not a Celebrity Seeking "FB Pahlavist" Fashion Victim ... And have been So From DAY ONE !

I didn't wait to join the Pahlavist bandwagon (if any ?) 3 Decades later to express my Pro Monarchist views, because I believe in them, and did so even before contributing to this website some 12 years ago ...

So no need to be grandstanding when lecturing me on an era you clearly never lived under.

Dunno how old you are or from which planet you are speaking from ( I'm sure Armstrong could tell ... Sorry I can't ... ) but clearly you like your like minds are talking on a period you either were too young to remember or are one of those Post Revolution generation Schizos who was brainwashed into believing any crap fed to them by your own intellectually bankrupt ex revolutionary parents added to the IRI propaganda machine.

Then I guess probably following the Post Election Crackdown, you suddenly realized that your Joon Jooy Republic was not such a "Behesht" your former "Presidenteh Mahboub" Khatami claimed it to be but rather the unreformable shit hole it always was from Day On [sic].

Other times, I witnessed users hurling accusations at others about being “agents of the Islamic Republic of Iran.” There also exists more diversity in political and religious ideology, and even ethnic diversity as described in Chapter 4, on IC than encountered in among the Iranian population in San Diego. It is difficult however, to gauge if all the ideas presented on IC have equal weight and measure among the Iranian diaspora at large. Because users can hide behind almost total anonymity if they choose to, without even any knowledge about where they are posting from, and because this political discourse is isolated from other phenomenon related to life course and identity, it is difficult to get a sense of how political talk on IC relates to other types of political practice on the part of users. In other words, do the most active users of IC engage in other types of political or civic acts? Another real possibility is that there is not necessarily a 1:1 correlation between user i.d.’s and actual users. One accusation that is bandied about are users that have multiple i.d.’s and thus post similar inflammatory content under different user names, thus seemingly driving up the popularity of their views. Perhaps it is instructive that no informants reported participating in this forum. Political discourse on IC, however, does show a diversity of opinion and serves to give foreground and context to political talk and participation among informants.

### **Electoral Behavior**

Transitioning again back to personal politics, this sub-section briefly looks at electoral behavior. According to the 2008 PAAIA survey results, four of every five Iranian Americans (80%) is registered to vote. Further, about one half of Iranian

Americans surveyed identified themselves as registered Democrats, in contrast to one in eight as Republicans and one in four as independents. The political science literature has tended to view electoral behavior as a robust indicator of political participation. All of the informants in my study reported voting in local, state, and national elections.

Interestingly, Maliheh, one of the 1.5 generation informants, reported trying to vote in the 2009 Iranian Presidential election in a hotel in San Francisco, which was one of the polling centers set up for diaspora members. Unfortunately she was turned away at the polls because Iran had recently changed the voting age from 16 to 18, and in 2009 she was not yet old enough. The other people she was with were eventually also turned away because the polling center had run out of ballots. Maliheh holds dual citizenship like a couple of other informants, and was the only one that recounted she had attempted to practice her electoral rights vis-à-vis the Iranian state. Iran does allow absentee voting for anyone who holds an Iranian passport.

### ***Finding a Model That Fits for Iranian Migrant Politics***

On the whole, immigrants' political agency has received little academic interest. In recent years, work by Ostergaard-Nielsen (2003), Reed-Danahay and Brettell (2008), and Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad (2008) signifies a growing interest in the topic. Patrick Ireland's (1994) work was a break-through by merging migration studies with the concept of political opportunity structures (POS) developed in political science. POS looks to the institutional set up of migrants' receiving context to consider the strategic importance of opportunities to mobilize (Pero and Solomos 2003). Ostergaard-Nielsen (2003) offers a further refinement of the POS approach because she takes into consideration both sending country context (political developments in the country of

origin such as conflicts, regime change and nation-building, environmental disasters, etc.) that may mobilize both recently departed migrants and established diasporas and the effect of receiving contexts to look at immigrants' transnational political practice. Below is the basic typology set out by Ostergaard-Nielsen (2003):

<p><b>Immigrant Politics</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political activities undertaken by a community to improve its social status in the host country, including attempts to improve access to services, fight discrimination, or heighten the groups' recognition and rights</li> </ul>
<p><b>Transnational Politics</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Various forms of direct cross-border participation in the politics of their country of origin by both migrants and refugees (such as voting and other support to political parties, participating in debates in the press, rallies against injustices in home country, demonstrations to defend it), as well as their indirect participation via the political institutions of the host country (or international organizations)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Homeland Politics</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pertains to the domestic or foreign policy of the homeland. Includes both opposition to and support for the current homeland political regime and its foreign policy goals. One of the main issues in the dialogue between migrants and their countries of origin is about their own legal, economic and political status in the homeland</li> </ul>
<p><b>Diaspora Politics</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A subset of homeland political practices confined to those groups that are barred from direct participation in the political system of their homeland - or who do not even have a homeland political regime of their own to support/oppose - like the not so often used concept of emigre politics (Cohen, 1997).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Translocal Politics</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiatives from abroad to better the situation in local communities of origin. Engagement in development in the home community may have wider political ramifications as the empowerment of local communities serves as a catalyst for wider political change (Portes, 1999:473-474)</li> </ul>

Figure 11 Table, Categories of Migrant Political Participation, cf Ostergaard-Nielsen (2003) and Levitt & Jaworsky (2007)

It is important to note that the last two categories, diaspora politics and translocal politics are actually viewed as subsets of homeland politics by Ostergaard-Nielsen (2003), though I assert that they deserve their own category, as will be shown below.

This particular model is valuable for first, distinguishing between different types of immigrant political action, and taking into account transnational behaviors and actions. Secondly, in defining and providing examples of each of these. It helpfully conglomerates all the other associated and related scholarship on political-economic phenomena such as hometown associations and the development of hometown



communities, for example. Finally, through the category of diaspora politics this model is sensitive to cases of transnational immigrant politics when groups are prevented and/or prohibited from direct participation in the political system of their homeland, as is the case with segments of the Iranian immigrant population.

While Ostergaard-Nielsen does recognize overlapping and blending between these categories and the fact that these activities tend to be multi-scalar in nature, the model does not distinguish between individual level and group level political practices. In this section I have described political and civic activities in which individuals engage in. Next, I discuss group-level political/civic practice through local organizations.

### ***The Landscape of Voluntary Associations in San Diego: Increasing Politics***

Earlier in this chapter I covered the role of voluntary-based ethnic organizations in the life of Iranian migrants as expressed by informants, and proposed a schema that places these voluntary associations as brokering between the social and political, and between the individual/personal and community-level political practice. This methodological view which places associations and organizations as central components in understanding migrant political practice has been used by Ostergaard-Nielsen (2003:780), and she sees organizations as relevant to migrants negotiating multi-level political institutional environments. In this section, I delve deeper into these organizations as entities unto to themselves.

Informants were members of one or both of the two Iranian grassroots based voluntary associations in San Diego that I focused on as part of this research. There is no exclusivity in either group and both groups share much of the same membership. Indeed, my informants were members of both these organizations, as well as the two other local

ones in San Diego.<sup>97</sup> AIAP is the Association of Iranian American Professionals and has been in existence since the early 1980s. On their website they explicitly state they are a non-religious and non-political organization. According to the “About Us” page of their website, the object of AIAP is to be a “positive element in the professional, social and economical [sic] well being of its members and the community.” They convene monthly meetings and invite guest speakers that are “successful professionals within or outside the Iranian-American community.” Individual memberships cost \$40 per year. Membership is open to all professionals interested in the Persian/Iranian culture. In addition they coordinate the cultural festivals for Nowrooz, Sizdeh Bidar, Chaharshanbeh Soori<sup>98</sup>, etc as well as hold other networking events for their members.

The Persian Cultural Center (PCC) is an umbrella organization for music and dance ensembles, a language school, and a monthly bilingual Farsi-English arts and culture magazine. The language school, also called the Iranian School of San Diego (ISSD), convenes twice weekly to offer Farsi language instruction to K-12 children and a handful of adults. Approximately 200 families participate in ISSD. ISSD borrows space from a local high school to hold their classes. They maintain a small office in another part of the city, and have one full time paid staff person. PCC and AIAP work closely together on many initiatives, the most recent example is a capital campaign to raise funds for PCC/ISSD to purchase a piece of land to build their own school.

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<sup>97</sup> The House of Iran (HOI) and Mehregan Foundation were the two other local groups. HOI is completely volunteer-driven and focused on traditional Persian culture and heritage. It maintains a “house” in Balboa Park, in a “village” composed of other houses coordinated by other ethnic immigrant groups in San Diego. Mehregan seems to be inactive.

<sup>98</sup> See Chapter 1 or glossary for explanation of these terms.

Though I have been focusing on AIAP and PCC for only a relatively short period of time<sup>99</sup>, I began to understand through informants and my participation in these organizations that AIAP and PCC themselves have changed through time, and experienced their own “life course.” Diasporas and immigrant groups are dynamic, and this dynamism is expressed through their organizations. Sheffer (2003) puts forth a developmental model of diasporas<sup>100</sup>, using the development and maintenance of specifically diaspora organizations as the litmus test to assess levels of integration, maturity, and/or ethnic maintenance. Sheffer’s continuum model of diaspora called “phased dynamic processes” helps in understanding how and why a diaspora community might change through time, based on experiences and circumstances both with homeland and host country. The first phase is immigrants permanently settling in host country. The second phase is joining forces with co-ethnics to create support groups and associations. I heard the history of PCC and AIAP through informants’ narratives—their early beginnings meeting in people’s home as “salons”, their foundings and formalization by other elite immigrants, and their support role to “psychologically” acculturate its members. Most recently, a cadre of younger members in their twenties and early thirties has become active in AIAP and has been vying for board positions. Mohsen explained that he decided not to re-new his board position in order to make way for the younger generation, feeling that AIAP needs new blood.

Further, though there is not a time scale provided in the model. The Iranians in the U.S. may represent an accelerated case, partly because of the violent disjuncture of the Iranian Revolution, concentrated wave of migration after this, and the receiving context

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<sup>99</sup> Initially, I participated as an ISSD student during the 2010-2011 academic year.

<sup>100</sup> I switch to using the term “diaspora” here because that is the term that Sheffer uses.

of Los Angeles and Southern California with its mass proliferation of Farsi language popular media (newspapers, television shows, news programs) during the 1980s—all of which helped establish an “exile culture” (Naficy 1993).

The next phase is really of interest here, and it is when immigrants formulate their goals and become better acquainted with their new social, political, and economic environments, and become aware of the advantages for further organization. They also begin to ask questions pertaining to identity, loyalty, etc. In this third phase, according to Sheffer, committed members will gradually work out their main strategies vis-a-vis their homelands and host countries. They will also adjust their goals to account for the circumstances prevailing in homelands and host countries, agree on operational procedures, determine the structure of their organizations, build those organizations, and establish patterns of their relationships with all relevant actors. This is the phase in which incipient diasporas “mature”. During this phase diaspora may become dormant, may integrate into host societies, show less interest in homelands, experience hybridizations, reduce activity of organizations, and so forth. Active membership of diasporas fluctuates. When circumstances change, a commitment to diaspora can be renewed (Sheffer 2003:142). My findings show that the Iranian immigrant population in San Diego, and their organizations like AIAP and PCC, exhibit characteristics of this third phase of maturation. In this case, integration, interest in homeland and hybridizations are all occurring concurrently among different members of the population, and by their respective organizations.

In Sheffer's model, dynamism is reflected in levels of membership in and commitment to diaspora organizations<sup>101</sup> among the diaspora. However, I found that it was the diaspora organizations themselves that changed and were dynamic. Local EGBOs throughout recent years have experienced increasing politicization. This is seen in the kinds of lectures presented at AIAP meetings, and in the articles for *Peyk*. AIAP and PCC in their mission statements specifically take a non-partisan, non-political stance, and have historically been "sensitive about ideology." Yet, in recent years, that does not mean the speakers are not political nor discuss political ideology. In this passage, Ramin acknowledges the changes in the organizations towards more political topics with the view that it represents a natural development in AIAP since its members have "grown up" in civil society,

- Ramin            Okay, and then they felt kind of proud of themselves or comfortable with themselves living here. And the from that point they started to open up and now I have American friends and their kids are raised here so they are in contact with the society at large but at that time in twenty seven years ago, that was their need. And I think those cultural organizations at that time, they filled this need and at that time they had to get the religion and political away. But as I said, if now they write a new by law and they said we're going to be politically active, I don't think that is going to be that much problem anymore. Not religiously but politically.
- Tina                Do you see that happening?
- Ramin               I think without saying it's happening...Yes, most of the speakers who come to AIAP they have political ideologies. But you know some of them are very contradicting each other. But people seem to sit and listen. And nobody screams or say anything at the end of the session people go by the microphone and ask their question which is the best forum that you can have.
- Tina                So what are the different ideologies that have been presented recently in the AIAP?
- Ramin               They have they have they have people that they are in favor of Sufism.<sup>102</sup>
- Tina                As a political ideology?
- Ramin               No, as a living ideology

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<sup>101</sup> Sheffer (2003) does not consider internet politicization.

<sup>102</sup> Sufism is a mystical sect of Islam

Tina Yeah, Okay

Ramin We haven't had the people with the very sharp political ideology that they come to talk about that, but the subjects that they discuss, and the in between all the subjects you can see that this this person is coming from....uh, a certain ideology, without talking about the Shah but the way that that he proceeds with his speech you can tell that person is...uh, pro Shah or this person is pro Khomeini or this person is anti Khomeini. Or this person is anti Shah<sup>103</sup> without them saying it

Tina Oh really?

Ramin Yeah, without them saying it, they can't say it but the way that they talk..... Can tell you that they are coming from a certain ideology but the people sit there and listen however they don't agree with him but at the end, they stand up and they ask their question. So it is the most democratic way of doing it and people come with their different ideas and talk and nothing happens, there is no disturbance there is no fight there is nothing so that means that we have grown the society of Iranian in the diaspora we have grown and uh, uh, even you know last year you said that you were in they had eh they had a very controversial speaker the Mr. Ganji and people at AIAP they wanted to hire some security officers for that session.

The speaker Ramin refers to is Akbar Ganji, a well-known political dissident and pro-democracy journalist who spent time in Evin Prison in Iran, and spoke at the September 2011 AIAP meeting. His lecture was titled "Why Didn't Iran Evolve into a Democracy?" Just as Ramin had predicted to the board president, extra security was unnecessary for that meeting. Another recent lecturer (June 2012) was Abdolali Bazargan who spoke on the issue of whether Islam can be married to Modernism in Iran into one system or whether they are in contradiction with each other. For Ramin, increased politics at AIAP meetings is not problematic and in fact represents a level of maturation in an organic development.

Local organizations reflect their memberships. Twenty-five years ago people were politically energized, and pro- or against something. Everyone was terrified to talk politics, lest meetings devolve into political factions shouting at each other. Now they

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<sup>103</sup> Shah was a monarch and was overthrown by Khomeini, an Islamic religious cleric during the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

have learned democracy, and “people have learned to live together,” as Ramin expressed. For others, like Fati, this change has been hypocritical because she sees certain types of politics allowed to be discussed but not others. Likewise, Behnaz and Afareen are “sick and tired” of the trend towards more political topics, and explains it as a bias of the board of directors who decide on the meeting topics,

Afareen Not what you heard is correct. Yeah the Iranian American Association changed in many different ways and one of them also as I say in recent years the only topic that hear in the monthly meetings are regarding the democracy in Iran, what the Iranian people are facing regarding the regime and religion.

Tina You said that the focus, you think, has shifted because of board of directors?

Afareen Yeah the member of the board of directory. They play a big role.

Tina In deciding. So what about, do you think anything had to do, at all, do you think anything had to do with the recent political events in Iran? Like June 2009 and everything that happened-

Afareen: See the board of the membership, each one of us we have our own ideology. And dependent on what my ideologies I'm going to pursue. If maybe, if as a, I'm a board in the AIAP maybe I convince the rest of the members one time also topic is going to be Bahá'í Faith. You know what I mean? And I feel that some of the member they are biased practically. And they are by bringing all this stuff.

Tina Sure.

Afareen I have the feeling that is my feeling. That is my personal feeling and idea.

Behnaz Of course the organization bylaw is not supposed to be religious or political.

Afareen There is pure political and religious.

Behnaz But unfortunately it has become that way. And the reason for it, I'm not sure if there's a conscience process. I think part of this they are just curious. What's gonna happen, who this person can tell us what is the magic? Truth is there is no magic. People have their own perspective of what this country is all about. What the politics is all about. And no one has an answer. If they had an answer by now that society would have transformed itself. So the truth is these people that lead that country come to such a time that either they're removed from power just like Libya or some other countries or they're gonna basically remain. There is no quick fix to this thing. So I think a lot of the people that live here they are looking for people to give them answer. What's going to happen, tell us. How can we, what's going to happen. Nothing's going to happen. As long as they're in power this is the religious fanatic regime is going to be in power and they're gonna practice. Whether how Moslem it is or it is not it

doesn't matter. They have their own version that they are practicing. And everybody else is wrong. Even within the government itself now there are 3 or 4 different secular beliefs.

They would like to see more professional or educational topics, “like a NASA engineer or heart surgeon,” also remembering fondly a couple of sessions with professional psychologists talking about Iranian marriage, family life and adjustment to American society. For their part, they are “sick and tired” of the majority of meetings being dominated by political topics for the last two years.

Informants have recounted a trend in local organizations towards more politicization, despite an established history of “being sensitive to ideology” and bylaws that specifically mention a non-partisan anti-religious stance. Is this truly part of the “life course” of the organization and represents a natural maturation of both the organization and its members, as in Ramin’s view? Or is it the product of specific political events and worldwide responses to them, as in June 2009 and/or the board’s bias? I would maintain that it not a single reason, but because of multiple factors and forces that work towards increasing organizational politicization, and is a reflection of the population’s “maturation” (*cf* Sheffer 2003). This debate also serves to show that an organization and its leadership do not necessarily speak for its membership at all times (Jones 1980).

In a previous section I asserted that Iranian voluntary associations and members are keyed in together in a mutually enforcing politicization. This is still the case, and thus far I have shown that politically/civically active Iranian migrants engage in multi-level and multi-scalar political acts partially conditioned by life experiences. I have also shown that local ethnically based voluntary associations have their own life course, reflecting the unique migration and life experience of their members. In the last section, I propose



that it is through voluntary associations and the practice of civic culture that Iranian immigrants “learn” democracy.

### ***‘Learning and Practicing’ Democracy***

Iranian voluntary associations in San Diego take participatory democracy as the model with which to lead the organization and convene meetings. At AIAP, there are democratically elected board members and members vote on particular items at meetings, and encourage members to speak up and ask questions. Yet in practice, full participatory democracy where every voice is recognized equally may be an unrealized ideal. A few informants felt a sense of exclusion based on religious affiliation, youth, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Maliheh and Niki attended one meeting of AIAP together because they were interested in hearing the lecturer but felt they were being surveilled and “got a lot of different stares,”

Niki                    So I found that really weird. In our separate experiences, not only were we getting stared at because we were two different people. I think separately we were getting stared at for not fitting the norm. Maliheh felt kind of like alienated because she was of the few women in there wearing a headscarf and she felt like, there's a lot of backlash, like you mentioned against religion within the Iranian community. And, sometimes prejudice against religious people and Maliheh felt that.

Niki felt she did not fit the norm partly because of the way she was dressed, less conservatively than the other attendees, and also because of a tattoo on her arm. Maliheh, already sensitive to negative attitudes toward Islam, felt in the spotlight because of her *hejab*. Iranian immigrants might want to disassociate with state politics but are not exempt of politicizing the personal, like how a body or a dress should look like

Fati, as a person who finds herself both inside and outside of Iranian organizations in San Diego, sees that certain kinds of politics are allowed through these voluntary

associations but not others. She recounted the time when she was trying to arrange a public lecture featuring a prominent Iranian female lawyer and political dissident and could not get some of the organizations to publicize the event because she was told it was too political. She also has a problem with the way meetings are run, and with how discussions are shut down in the Q&A session that follows the presentation, and does not see the democracy accurately reflected in the forum of AIAP meetings.

For Fati, San Diego Iranian organizations, through their sometimes less than democratic practice, perpetuate the hegemonic structures in Iran. Guarnizo and Smith (1998:5) found that transnational practices may develop creolized or hybrid cultural, political or social forms that may be counter hegemonic, but are not always resistant (cited in Fabos 2002). Looking at the scene of Sudanese NGOs in Cairo, Fabos (2002) found that the transnational condition of Sudanese migrants in Cairo has opened up new opportunities for Sudanese women, youth, and ethnic minorities in some cases, but also perpetuated the hegemonic structures of Sudan in other cases.

Yet I also heard in informants' narratives "personal" metaphors inscribed onto the national body politic and how growth in the personal as in "being able to tolerate differences" signaled fundamental change for the larger community and nation. Iranian voluntary associations therefore may act as catalysts for such changes. In this passage Fati presents several interesting ideas about the source and growth of democratic ideals. Using the analogy of her decades-long participation in the Iranian women's studies conference, the first idea she presents is that people have to learn democracy and this learning flows from individuals to the nation-state. There is also the feeling that it too much to expect that those in power will institute democracy on their own. Secondly,

using the metaphor of plant life taking root and growing, she expressed the idea that democracy grows organically from the “little things” that might remain even if the regime falls. Finally, we find in her narrative the surprising and unexpected idea that the lack of alternatives under the Islamic Republic of Iran has forced people to mature and learn more.

Fati            I think it’s – sometimes I think the problem in Iran is deeper than what we think if this regime goes. If this thing goes, the little things will still stay and it can grow again. So, to me, it was good in a way that this regime stayed for longer and there’s no alternative because people are learning more.  
It’s the learning process that makes it hard. It’s under the pressure that you learn more, that not being even among the Iranian women activists that I go to this conference for 23 years I see how each one of us grew so much and learned so much.

Behnaz and Afareen felt that democracy and freedom is a universal and natural desire for all humans, but these ideals come with a responsibility to learn democracy.

Behnaz            And of course democracy comes with responsibility. And that responsibility is something that is a learning process. So it is, I am certain that overnight these countries are not gonna become democratic but at least once they have the opportunity to begin to -  
Afareen            Practice.  
Behnaz            Learn.  
Afareen            And then act according to those democratic rules. I think we will find that world peace will come about. Really. It is inevitable. I mean we have only two choice: to either push the button and extinguish humanity off this planet, one way or the other, or bring about world peace.

And in going on to discuss AIAP specifically, it is through these kinds of groups that allow for the “practice” of democracy. As Afareen remarked, “They tolerate each other. They bring the ideology from the other side and they work together.” The national body politic is inscribed onto their individual values. A change in the personal leads to greater changes in society, and the only way the Islamic Republic of Iran can move forward is the idea of “change from within,” in other words bottom-up change from individuals

learning democratic ideals and notions of freedom. There is also the awareness that it is through participation in the institutions of U.S. civil society that Iranians have learned about democratic ideals such as tolerance and respect for free and open speech.

It is noteworthy that this same sentiment about Iranians being able to enact democracy through learning how to tolerate different viewpoints has been expressed on Iranian.com. Here, a user named Mehrban on October 12, 2012, attributes Iranian.com for helping him to learn this skill, and as being the one and only place where Iranians can freely express themselves, unlike in social networking sites where you need to present your “best face to the world,”

There has been one feature to IC and only one feature that sets it apart from other sites, people (Iranians) with different points of view could learn to discuss with one another, it is a habit we have never developed, I personally have learned it here (if I have learned it).

Being from a hierarchical society we have little room for opposing ideas and do not have a capacity to even reason through our own ideas because often we don't even know why we think what we think. Esfand jaan<sup>104</sup>, I don't expect you to understand the importance of this feature, as you have consistently opted to express yourself in leechaar<sup>105</sup> as opposed to a reasonable discourse.

This is not a social networking site, where you need to present your best face to the world. It is **THE ONE AND ONLY** [emphasis in original] place where Iranians can freely express themselves and learn to tolerate each other.

My conversation here is mostly with Mr. Amin and I am sorry that it is taking place in your blog. I think it is my responsibility as a reader and a contributor of this site to emphasize to with Mr. Amin what it is that actually makes his site not only unique but also worthwhile.

BTW, Esfand jaan, unlike you I don't find most blogs worthless, by being here I have learned a whole lot and cherish my daily visits to this site. Now go ahead and try to degrade my heartfelt insistence of something extremely important to haggling or whatever your aggressive leechaar lexicon prompts you to do. You cannot (yet) delete my reasonable comment :).

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<sup>104</sup> Esfand was the author of the original blog article that Mehrban is responding to. “Jaan” is a common term of endearment meaning “dear.”

<sup>105</sup> Closely related to the idea of provoking.

The larger context of this comment was the question of whether the authors of blog articles should be able to moderate their own content and delete responses as they wished. Mehrban felt that deleting others' comments, however offensive to the author, was akin to shutting down true and open discourse. Another response post by Mehrban on October 10, 2012 where there was discussion about the potential of Iranian.com being shut down, offers the idea that discourse on IC should aim to be a model of what open discourse in society-writ-large should look like.

Dear Mr. Amin, I am not sure if a blog is someone's home and even if it is someone's home it is a home whose door has been opened to the public. What does it mean if someone is interested in presenting their ideas to the public but not interested in hearing opposing views? How can you stop your site from becoming a propaganda scene, or a hollow self-aggrandizing venue without any challenge (checks and balances) from other readers/bloggers?

**Shutting out opposing views is what we (Iranians) are very good at and needless to say it is the root of many of the ills in our society. At IC we have learned that it would not kill us to hear something that we don't agree with and in time we each have developed ways of dealing with it in a way that has not required killing (deleting) each other.**[emphasis mine]

Further, Mehrban feels that individual posters need the “checks and balances” provided by other users commenting on their ideas to keep the site from devolving into propaganda. In other instances it is when discussion breaks down between individual members into extreme negativity and name-calling that members might make a general statement that Iranians still “have a long way to go” and tolerating different viewpoints is a “habit Iranians never learned,” as in the following examples,

Hafez for Beginners posted on September 6, 2012

Better luck to the next generation - I guess - and I do think those born in the US don't have the baggage and can learn to listen and put up with differences better.

Anonymous Observer posted on September 4, 2012

And to add - Iranians (especially the older generation) are not used to a civilized political discourse. Look at what I have been called just in this blog--by people who don't know a single thing about me---for offering a point of view!! We have a long way to go in learning how to deal with differing points of view. Hopefully, the new generation will fare better than these obsolete fossils.

Among the virtual community of Iranian.com, I witnessed more fervent, more hostile enunciations of detailed political programs for Iran. Naficy (1993), Mostofi (2003) and others have asked whether there is a unified Iranian diaspora community, given their heterogeneity in dispersed places of settlement. Certainly, political factionalism is a hallmark of the Iranian immigrant public sphere before *and* after the 2009 election. I cannot answer if there is indeed a unified Iranian diaspora “community,” that can agree on the exact vision of what they want for Iran. But, three years ago I thought it was a possibility witnessing post-June 2009 events. I agree with Mostofi (2003) in that a hallmark of Iranian-American identity is that Iranians maintain close cultural ties to where they come from either through frequent visits, nostalgia or memories, maintaining connections to the Iran of the past and present.

Different Iranians have different ideas about the right kind of political program that will “fix” Iran. Some want the return of a constitutional monarchy and the return of Shah Reza Pahlavi’s son to power. Others want a secular democracy, while others want to keep the theocracy and open it up and modify it to adjust to the realities of Iran today. Even within these differences in ideology are more nuanced arguments for or against particular political figures in Iran’s past and present. Anti-Islamic Republic of Iran sentiment is perhaps over represented among Iranian immigrants in Southern California, especially. This is a function of their unique migration history, where the majority emigrated as a result of the 1979 Iranian revolution either as “ideological migrants” or

political asylees fleeing (e.g Bahai's and other religious minorities), etc. (Bozorgmehr 1998).

Even within Iran, there seems to be little agreement about exactly what the future should look like. In an interview about the effect of economic sanctions in Iran and the plummeting exchange rate, Karim Sadjadpour, a senior associate and Iran analyst at the Carnegie Endowment explained that the Iranian people's central complaint is economic in nature, "Iranians are disunited about what kind of a political system they want, but they're united in wanting greater economic dignity."<sup>106</sup> Given the multiplicity of voices, all shouting at different volumes, to what extent is agreement necessary for there to be "community"?

In conclusion, I would like to consider why the expression of political difference takes radically different forms in cyberspace and in the real world, if it is indeed true that is through online and offline voluntary associations that Iranians learn about tolerance and openness to opposing views. One reason might be the relative safety in anonymity that members of IC feel, versus Facebook which relies on users "true" identities. In this chapter, I have examined the similarities and differences between Iranian political discourse taking place through cyber-communities and through local organizations. I have shown that in order to get a more accurate picture of the nature of political agency among immigrants, that we must open up our methodological lens to seek political/civic acts in as many places as possible, and throughout the individual's life course. Yet, there

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<sup>106</sup> **Memarian, Omid. October 4, 2012. "Iran's Currency Crisis: Bad News For Mahmoud Ahmadinejad." Source: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/10/04/iran-s-currency-crisis-bad-news-for-mahmoud-ahmadinejad.html>, accessed 5 October 2012.**

is something troubling by the fact that the discourse on IC much more often turns hostile and negative, so that there are more and more instances of users abandoning the site, as I observed. Seemingly, this is alien to the very democracy it attempts to enact. If the ability to express differences through the venues in which political discourse takes place among Iranian immigrants marks a democratic ideal, then we must accept the irony that it is through this expression, however hateful, that it enacts democracy and creates political “community” where community signifies the existence of a diversity and multiplicity of voices. Jahanshah Javid, the founder of Iranian.com, sums it up when an interviewer asks him whether he thinks the comments sections contribute to constructive dialogue or serve as a platform for various groups to attack each other, he responds with, “The comments section is not where you'd often find civilized discussion especially when the topic is about politics or religion, but it's still better than no discussion at all...”<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Karami, Arash (2012)



## **Chapter 6 Interpretations**

In this final chapter, I offer a series of interpretations, as well as suggest implications and limitations of where my methodological choices and findings have led. This study was designed to understand political ‘talk’ among Iranians in San Diego using conventional and virtual ethnography. For conventional ethnography, I investigated the types of and meanings attributed to the political and civic activities of a small group of Iranians in San Diego using a life course perspective. This in-depth method used for interviewing and observations was coupled with discussion content encountered through digital observation of three online communities. The value of these findings, addressed below, lies not in their immediate generalizability but in the uncovering of processes that might challenge, modify or enlarge current theory.

### ***Linking the Political and Civic Realms of Engagement***

The first major finding has to do with the interrelatedness and interconnection between the political and the civic spheres. In this regard, I found that voluntary associations were immensely useful as a research tool to access informants, and to understand institutional participation and its connection to other forms of civic and political action. However, the concept of voluntary associations was less useful as a theoretical construct since I did not engage with the framework of social capital. Rather what emerged from immigrants’ participation in voluntary associations was the idea of “social learning about civic engagement” (Brettell and Reed-Danahay 2012:198). In other words, Iranian immigrant participation in San Diego organizations and through online communities provided a pathway to learn participatory democracy. “Practicing and learning democracy,” as informants framed it, was strongly tied to their sentiments about

the necessity and value of civic and political engagement and the importance of “giving back” and not “taking advantage” of structures within the U.S. Civic engagement is a pathway to political engagement and vice versa.

Further, I have teased out a potential relationship between diaspora organizations and individuals. I have positioned these organizations as evolving through time, responding to constituencies’ needs and also reacting to homeland events. I posited that in the case of Iranians in San Diego, diaspora organizations and individuals are keyed in together in mutually re-enforcing politicization, while also serving a functional role in “helping” their members to adapt to new circumstances in the U.S. The organizations analyzed for this study contribute to individual-level politicization via homeland and host nation, as well as instigating civic engagement in the local sphere.

### ***Developing a Typology of Political/Civic Action***

Second, by extending the definition of what “being political” among immigrants and members of a diaspora might mean as a methodological strategy, I discovered that immigrant actors engage in a multiplicity of different political acts. By opening up the definition of political action to consider political discourse as talk manifested in different areas and in different phases in one’s life, I have helped to unpack what political agency among my informants entails. The typology of Iranian political and civic action presented in Chapter 5 details these activities<sup>108</sup>

Further, I discovered that this political agency has multiple and overlapping targets, being transnational in some efforts, local or national in other efforts. For

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<sup>108</sup> The typology that developed included: Green Movement solidarity rallies, participation in activist organizations, participation in diaspora organizations, Facebook activism, diaspora websites as sites of political discourse, and electoral behavior.

example, Green Movement solidarity rallies taking place in 2009-2010 were intended, at least partially, to draw local attention to events in Iran, but were part of a larger transnational movement to stand in support with Green Movement protestors. Facebook activism for my informant Mohsen is ultimately aimed at regime change in Iran, but he sees these activities in concert with his serving on the AIAP board of directors. Yet his civic participation through AIAP has helped him find “community” in San Diego and eased his transition to life in the U.S. as an immigrant.

I started this research looking for transnationalism but I am not certain whether I found it. It was difficult to extract transnational efforts as distinct from local or national ones. Examining my informants’ political agency in San Diego and online provides us an idea about the limits and boundaries of transnationalism. Transnational theory was developed in part as a response to the failures of methodological nationalism and the inability to think beyond the nation-state and to theorize the concept of simultaneous incorporation (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). But does my study fit transnational theory and do my informants pass the transnationalism “test”? Informants’ political actions that reference and aim toward regime change in Iran that might be defined as ‘transnational’ by scholars like Basch, Glick Schiller and Blanc (1994) are actually not so defined by scholars like Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt (1999).<sup>109</sup> Political transnationalism occurs in some types of collective and individual behavior among Iranian immigrants in San Diego, but not in others. For example, absentee voting in Iran’s elections described by

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<sup>109</sup> The typology of political transnationalism as laid out by Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt (1999) include activities such as: hometown civic committees, alliances of immigrants representing home country political associations, fundraisers for home country political candidates, consular officials and representatives of national political parties abroad, dual nationality, and immigrants elected to home country legislatures.

informant Malieh is a concrete example of political transnationalism, but most other forms of direct cross-border participation in the politics of Iran are barred.

What happens when the geo-political relations between two nation-states prevents most types of transnational participation, to the full extent as one desires for home country? I explored the construction, maintenance, and meaning of this type of immigrant political agency in order to present the range of possibilities in such a scenario. For instance, taking part in Green Movement support rallies as part of a larger worldwide movement with Iranians across the diaspora participation can be construed as transnational. At the same time, absentee electoral voting is defined as “transnational.” Political transnationalism with regards to the global diaspora of Iranians is different than transnational political actions that Iranian immigrants might take part in, yet those differences in scale and function have not been compared in the literature.

Additionally, I found that the nation-state, specifically homeland, structures possibilities of action. In accordance with my finding, Waldinger and Fitzgerald (2004) note, “Dual loyalty becomes a particularly intense issue when belligerency develops between host and sending countries... Thus, while international migrants and their descendants recurrently engage in concerted action across state boundaries, the use, form, and mobilization of the connections linking here and there are contingent outcomes subject to multiple *political* constraints, (1178-79).” Among Iranian immigrants, there is the additional factor of mixed migration status affecting and structuring possibilities of political action. For example, the refugees in my sample were absolutely prevented from returning to Iran in their lifetime. Others returned periodically and maintained dual nationality. The political action they engaged in differed. Another example is the ways

communication between Iran and U.S. is monitored so informants use novel ways to disseminate information to their Iranian networks that aims to subvert the Iranian regime indirectly.

If informants' political actions, as they themselves acknowledge, has little effect in Iran, then for what overall purpose does migrant political agency serve? Despite this, their actions were not construed as meaningless by them. As Sheffer (2003) rightly points out, no diaspora could overthrow a repressive regime in its homeland. Yet their trans-state networks, such as using Facebook to disseminate news and information to friends and family in Iran, and in other cases through the global network of Bahá'ís lobbying in host countries, and as seen in the activities of PAAIA, “diasporans can foment internal instability and tensions in their homelands” (Sheffer 2003:215). Other examples include participating in local Green Movement solidarity rallies. Informants felt that such activities, especially in this age of instantaneous communication, helped the overall cause of regime change in Iran.

I have established that no one category—immigrant, exile, diaspora, transnational, expatriate, hyphenated ethnic identity—fits the political experiences of Iranians outside of Iran. As I showed in Chapter 2 through the literature review, my goal was to approach this topic with an open mind, yet also be true to the terminology of the respective literature I was drawing from, and what informants offline and online themselves used. I argued that the use of such terms is personal (having to do with life course experiences and identities), situational (e.g. depends on migration status and (in)ability to return), and strategic (depends on audience), with political implications all around. Understanding what term is deployed when helps not only to understand individual-level actions and

motivations, but where and why those boundaries are drawn between groups. Such knowledge lends insight to the following statement excerpted from a discussion on Iranian.com,

If Iranian immigrants had any sense they would draw a sharp line of distinction between themselves and exile groups, whether militaristic or religious based, and advocate for their rights from an organization that is not already predesigned to be a divide-&-conquer operation like PAAIA, NIAC, PDMI, PMOI, and the other alphabet soup of groups that exist. Primary interests of exiles and immigrants are often far from being the same.<sup>110</sup>

The poster is distinguishing “Iranian immigrants” from “exiles.” Seemingly, both groups of people are Iranians living outside the territory of Iran. Yet the sense of what immigrant means is different than what an exile means for this poster, each with differing interests.

### ***Understanding Modes of Belonging through the Life Course***

If most of the political activities Iranians outside of Iran engage in are not neatly bounded by the above categories, then how do we classify the actors? Understanding Iranian Americans’ political engagement and participation as an immigrant politics, a transnational politics, a homeland politics, and a diaspora politics (*cf* Ostergaard-Nielsen 2003), sometimes simultaneously, goes a long way in understanding their various political moments. Yet the model provided by Ostergaard-Nielsen (2003) does not distinguish between individual level and group level political practices. Some members do some activities, while other members do another. Because the model conflates the personal with the collective, it is difficult to understand whether and what ‘thresholds’ of activity are necessary to warrant a category. It also assumes religious, ethnic and class homogeneity among groups, with no accounting for a community composed of people

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<sup>110</sup> Posted September 7, 2012 by user Mort Gilani

with differing migration statuses, or differing waves of migration (length of stay), or subsequent generations (such as 1.5 and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation).

Albeit it is a challenge to develop a model that accounts for all these contingencies, therefore the value of understanding immigrants' (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation included) political activities through a life course perspective cannot be underestimated. This method, instead of looking at isolated moments of migrant mobilizations, which then tries to locate them as either pertaining to home country, host country, or transnational, *explicitly* takes into consideration home country contexts, migration process, and host country opportunities and contexts across the continuum of a migrant's life. Further, it leaves room to understand and interpret moments of extreme disjuncture, such as the 1979 Iranian Revolution or the 2009 Iranian election crises that have profound impacts on the politicization of immigrants, first or second generation.

I was able to link political and civic action to broader factors in the life course and identity aspects of the individual. Thus far, most accounts of immigrant politics have favored community-level motivations (i.e. responding to a new ordinance that affects the neighborhood, or responding to proposed anti-immigrant legislation, etc.) and less on an individual's patterns and motivations for action. Brettell (2008) notes that "Many people initially become civically engaged because some issue or problem touches them personally and they want to participate in effecting change" (242). The life course view, however, of political and civic action offers something more nuanced than a focus on "moments" or events of immigrant mobilization or particular rallies, or even just considering electoral behavior. Through this perspective, we can understand values, motivations, and identities, and how they relate to action and behavior. For instance, I

determined that the sentiment of a politically-mediated exile consciousness, whether or not the individual is actually an exile, informs and motivates political action. In other words, being “separated” from homeland in terms of political sentiment and ideology is a driver toward civic and political participation in the host country. I discovered that among my informants, political participations was less issue-based than resulting from something more fundamental to life experience, and which triggered on-going engagement with civic and political institutions in the U.S.

I initially began this study with the idea of investigating how one incident of homeland conflict, specifically the June 2009, affected Iranian Americans. Beyond finding generational differences, (for example the 1979 Revolution that brought the IRI to power for the older generation of immigrants was more impactful than the June 2009 events), I learned that although experiencing these incidences of homeland conflict were formative, they were not responsible for the continuing transformation and politicization of individual immigrants. Appendix 3 presents some of my informants’ narratives about their feelings about June 2009 events and the Green Movement through time. There is interplay between life course experiences, aspects of identity, and effect of organizations. Overall, I concluded that June 2009 provided Iranian immigrants with more fodder for political talk; incited political action in the short-term, and in some cases became an impetus for more political activism, such as in Sia’s and Niki’s case, members of the 1.5 and second generation.

Further, eliciting life histories from informants and documenting the various traditions (Caughey 2006) that were important factors in their life, I ascertained that identity among Iranian immigrant informants was multi-dimensional, and correlated



identity types with social change and enculturation that occurred with migration. I was able to assess what particular aspects of identity were transformed, hybridized, or stayed the same as a result of the migration process. I found a strong correlation between declining religiosity and hybridized forms of political discourse. While personal political identities or ideologies may have stayed the same through the life course, the medium and mode of political discourse among Iranians has changed to be more democratic and inclusive, without fear of reprisal. There is also a suggestion that practicing a non-dominant religion and being a member of an ethnic minority (i.e. not Moslem, and not Persian) among Iranian immigrants tended to remain relatively unchanged throughout the life course and migration experience.

### ***Connecting Two Sites of Political Discourse through Conventional and Virtual Ethnography***

The fourth major area of findings has to do with the methodological utility of merging conventional and virtual ethnography, and the relationship between the two sites of political discourse. Initially, online data gave foreground to political ideologies and potential differences among informants, and functioned to extend the reach of my research enabling me to conduct “multi-sited” fieldwork among dispersed Iranians (Freidenberg 2011). In some cases evidence from online communities re-enforces what I found through conventional ethnography. For instance, I discovered a couple of concepts about civic/political participation and its broader meaning that informants had in common with Iranian social media users. The first is shared discourses about the lack of participation among most other Iranians, and notions of ‘taking advantage’ of U.S. society and the need to give back to society. The second is a discourse about Iranians learning how to be democratic and live in a democracy by first practicing values like

tolerance and equality through organizations. I concluded that the replication of these discourses across two mediums (online and offline) indicates the formation of a distinct Iranian-American civil society. An Iranian-American civil society is distinct because it references the unique political history of Iran and Iranian categories of self-responsibility, personhood, and the components of communalism. In other cases, the two mediums present contradictory views. The most radical difference between online and offline political discourse was the nature and tone of the discourse, with the expression of political and ideological differences online as being characterized as more hostile and divisive.

In the realm of cyberspace examining the activity level and role of diaspora voluntary associations, such as the two Facebook (FB) groups and Iranian.com (IC), I found that they too have evolved through time, even since 2009, to reflect their members' changing interests. Both Human Rights for Iran (HRI) and Iranian American Youth (IAY), the two groups on Facebook, showed decreased activity since their founding in 2009 and 2010. HRI continues on as a student group at a university, with their FB presence helping to coordinate and organize their efforts. IC users have provided anecdotal evidence that activity is an indicator of level of interest, and that readership has decreased in the last year. Recent blog discussions between members have speculated that IC will soon shut down, with a new website called Iroon.com taking its place. Tabulating number of posts through time, one marker of activity, for Iranian.com's five-year history demonstrated that indeed subsequent years after 2009 have yielded fewer and fewer posts. Therefore this presents an important finding about the multiple ways the internet can be a forum for engaging politically and creating political community.

Mohsen's Facebook activism and HRI's use of FB for activism and organizational coordination evidences at least two different uses of Facebook for political participation and engagement. Furthermore, this differed significantly from the way IC creates a political community composed of a diversity and multiplicity of voices engaging in political discourse.

### ***Future Prospects and Recommendations***

In the presentation of these particular findings, I tried to consider online and offline findings together as it was most useful when treating them as *equal* sites for political discourse. Yet they are not equal. I can only take at face value the identities of Iranian.com members, and moreover that they do not have multiple user i.d.'s or that they are not counter-intelligence agents of the IRI, as has been accused by some, attempting to take over and sabotage political discourse. I do not have a broader understanding of how IC functions in the life of members, or whether they engage in other types of civic or political activities. While I know that IC convenes a large number of Iranians in the diaspora<sup>111</sup> (more than any other site purportedly), and it is a politically and ethnically heterogeneous group, I do not know how representative its members are of the actual population.

Further, I did not follow my informants to their online practices. None mentioned being part of specific communities like Iranian.com to discuss politics, other than Facebook very generally. Therefore in the analysis of findings, the maximum yield of virtual ethnography was to be able to note the presence of certain categories of discourse, and describe the various political ideologies and controversies, and count frequencies

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<sup>111</sup> Following my own rules about how these terms are situational, I am using diaspora because IC members reside in the U.S., Canada, Europe, Australia, etc.

through time. By comparing Facebook groups and Iranian.com, I was able to show that different virtual communities are not equal to each other, each characterized by different functions, aims, and discourses.

Conducting research in cyberspace using virtual communities and social media means not taking for granted that any site will do. Researchers must first have a general understanding of the “universe” of all available cyber communities that align with the topic, then be careful and purposive in the selection of such groups.

In future research combining conventional and virtual ethnography, I would push to further maximize the yield of virtual ethnography by making it more focused and systematic. By concentrating on one online community, and conducting more longitudinal and in-depth content analysis, devise tools in qualitative analysis software to help in organizing such data and deciding which pieces of data are most relevant.<sup>112</sup> The issue remains, however, that the people participating in forums like Iranian.com are not the same people who I recruited as informants. Forthcoming studies should make an effort to follow active members of online associations off line to see how the two venues relate to each other.

A factor not considered in this research is the class position of my Iranian informants, nor of me. All of them are middle or upper-middle class. I did not engage with the topic of socio-economic status as such because it was missing from informants’ narratives. A few informants were conscious of class hierarchy present among Iranians, but no further. Undoubtedly the fact that they are middle class affects the findings. For example, my economic circumstances and lack of extra funds affected my research

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<sup>112</sup> Examples include of the kinds of associated data with a post would be user name, date, time, user location, number of comments, number of views, etc.

opportunities by limiting the chance for more participant observation in certain settings. Specifically, I could not attend most of the special evening events offered by AIAP or PCC because these events required tickets that cost upwards of \$150 in some cases. It could be argued that only someone with a middle- to upper-middle status would have the economic means or cultural capital to have the time and resources to participate in voluntary associations where the main goal of the organization is networking, as is the case with AIAP. This might explain the under-participation critique by some of my informants. Participant observation in other venues (like the ethnic markets where I saw more recently-arrived Iranians working the cash register, for example) brought me an awareness of other classes of Iranian immigrants that was left out in my informants' narrative.

Among middle class actors, economic and linguistic acculturation is taken for granted and un-problematized among middle class actors. On the other hand, the study of middle class immigrants has advantages because there are relatively few sources which consider the behaviors and activities of such a group. Some examples are Raj (2003) and Heiman, Freeman, and Leichty (2012). Further research might interrogate what the absence of class position in narratives and discourses tell us, and also examine how much of their political agency is tied to class position.

In terms of immigrant voluntary associations, future research would continue to tease out the significance and impact of these associations on everyday life and individual and group-level politicization, perhaps by taking a comparative approach through examining different countries and sites of settlement. This would allow me to assess the effect of different institutional environments and contexts of reception. Yet, while

immigrant voluntary associations provide a significant window for understanding the interplay between individual- and group-level factors and forces in political ideology and agency, how do we begin to theorize the non-participants?

Finally, the perspective of applied anthropology sheds light on a couple of potentialities for this research. Diplomacy is a moving target with Iran, as the 2012 Presidential debates evidenced. This kind of research is beneficial for forming U.S. policy towards Iran by providing a better understanding of the Iranian immigrant population: their forms of political agency which range from local to transnational goals, their range of ideologies, and their relationship to U.S. civic structures. On a national and local level, Iranian voluntary associations make claims of unity under an Iranian nationalist discourse, yet underneath the banner of “Iranian” or “Iranian-American” must be enough room to include a multiplicity of competing religious ideologies, political programs, generational identities, and even sub-national ethnicities. The information presented in this research might help organizations address and serve the needs of their members better. I have had discussions with one local leader about using the large cultural festivals they organize as an opportunity to help them design and implement a formative evaluation to aid in planning future programs that would meet the needs of newer constituencies.

## Appendix 1 Chronology of Major Historical Events for Iran<sup>113</sup>

Until 1979, monarchical rule had been an almost uninterrupted feature of Iranian government for nearly 500 years. However, the tradition of monarchy in the region is itself even older. In the sixth century B.C., Iran's first empire, the Achaemenid Empire, was already established. It had an absolute monarch, centralized rule, a highly developed system of administration, aspirations of world rule, and a culture that was uniquely Iranian even as it borrowed, absorbed, and transformed elements from other cultures and civilizations. Although Alexander the Great brought the Achaemenid Empire to an end in 330 B.C., under the Sassanids (A.D. 224-642) Iran once again became the center of an empire and a great civilization.

The impact of the Islamic conquest in the seventh century was profound. It introduced a new religion and a new social and legal system. The Iranian heartland became part of a world empire whose center was not in Iran. Nevertheless, historians have found striking continuities in Iranian social structure, administration, and culture. Iranians contributed significantly to all aspects of Islamic civilization; in many ways they helped shape the new order. By the ninth century, there was a revival of the Persian (Farsi) language and of a literature that was uniquely Iranian but was enriched by Arabic and Islamic influences.

The breakup of the Islamic empire led, in Iran as in other parts of the Islamic world, to the establishment of local dynasties. Iran, like the rest of the Middle East, was affected by the rise to power of the Seljuk Turks and then by the destruction wrought first by the Mongols and then by Timur, also called Tamerlane (Timur the Lame).

As Dabashi (2007) and Tehranian (2004), the “genius” of Iranian culture is in its syncretism (Shia Islam, Persian Mythology, Mesopotamian influences), and “ability to synthesize and transcend differences. Iranian culture absorbed elements of Aryan, Greek, Indian, Arab, Turkic, Mongolian, and Western languages, literature, mythologies, and beliefs without losing its identity. All dynasties were tribal in origin prior to the Pahlavi dynasty.

1501-1732

Safavid dynasty. Iran was reconstituted as a territorial state within borders not very different from those prevailing today. Shia Islam became the state religion, and monarchy once again became a central institution. Persian became unquestionably the language of administration and high culture. Although historians no longer assert that under the Safavids Iran emerged as a nation-state in the modern sense of the term, nevertheless by the seventeenth century the sense of Iranian identity and Iran as a state within roughly demarcated borders was more pronounced.

1796-1925

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<sup>113</sup> Compiled from Metz (1987), Kelley (1993), Dabashi (2007), Tehranian (2004), and BBC News Iran Profile Timeline (2012).

Qajar dynasty attempted to revive the Safavid Empire and in many ways patterned their administration after that of the Safavids. But the Qajars lacked the claims to religious legitimacy available to the Safavids; they failed to establish strong central control; and they faced an external threat from technically, militarily, and economically superior European powers, primarily Russia and Britain.

1905-1907

Constitutional Revolution. Foreign interference in Iran. Qajar misrule, and new ideas on government led in 1905 to protests and eventually to the Constitutional Revolution which, at least on paper, limited royal absolutism, created in Iran a constitutional monarchy, and recognized the people as a source of legitimacy.

1921

Coupe d'état against weakened Qajar monarchy led by journalist, Sayyid Ziya Tabatabai , and an army officer Reza Khan.

1921-26

Reza Khan, in a bid for supreme power, ousts Tabatabai and arranges his own election by the Constitutional Assembly. He names himself Reza Shah, King of Kings, and establishes the Pahlavi dynasty.

1927-40

Reza Shah pursues a campaign of secularization. Revolts by Muslim clerics are brutally repressed. A centralized government imposes its authority throughout the country. The wearing of the veil is banned. Muslim leaders are forced to shave their beards, and men are forced to wear Western attire. For the first time, all citizens are required to have birth certificates and last names. In addition to the shah's attempts to break religious hierarchy, he overhauled the administrative machinery and vastly expanded the bureaucracy. He created an extensive system of secular primary and secondary schools and, in 1935, established the country's first European-style university in Tehran. These schools and institutions of higher education became training grounds for the new bureaucracy and, along with economic expansion, helped create a new middle class. The shah also expanded the road network, successfully completed the trans-Iranian railroad, and established a string of state-owned factories to produce such basic consumer goods as textiles, matches, canned goods, sugar, and cigarettes.

1941

British and Soviet troops invade Iran. Reza Shah, who had been attempting to lessen Soviet and British influence in Iran by developing ties with Nazi Germany is forced to abdicate. His son, Mohammad Reza, is acceptable to allied powers and is sworn in as new Shah. During this time, the Marxist, pro-Soviet Tudeh party is established.

1951

Mohammad Mossadeq, the popular prime minister, leads the National Front, a social-democratic organization to power. When the Persian oil industry is nationalized, Britain invokes an economic boycott.



1952

Iran's economy is weakened. The Tudeh party gains strength, and the U.S. fears growing Soviet influence in Iran. Mossadeq and the Shah struggle for power.

1953

The Shah attempts to dismiss Mossadeq, but the prime minister resists. The Shah flees Iran but the army returns him to power in a coup covertly organized by the CIA and British, toppling the democratically elected government of Muhammad Mosaddeq and installed then-deposed monarch Reza Shah Pahlavi to serve the interests of the U.S. (Dabashi 2007).

1957

SAVAK, the secret police organization, is instituted with technical assistance provided by CIA and FBI advisors.

1962-63

The Shah embarks on a campaign to modernize and westernize the country. He launches the 'White Revolution', a program of land reform and social and economic modernization. During the late 1960's the Shah became increasingly dependent on the secret police (SAVAK) in controlling those opposition movements critical of his reforms.

1978 September

"Black Friday" massacre. Government troops fire on thousands of demonstrators violating martial law at Jaleh Square in Tehran. The Shah's policies alienate the clergy and his authoritarian rule leads to riots, strikes and mass demonstrations. Martial law is imposed.

1978 November

Hundreds of thousands march in Tehran in support of Khomeini. Strikes spread throughout the country.

1979 January

The Shah leaves Iran. Shahpour Bakhtiar accepts post of prime minister from the Shah providing authority is granted to the Regency Council. Three days after the Shah departs, a million people demonstrate against the new prime minister. Within a month, Bakhtiar resigns and his cabinet collapses.

1979 February 1

Khomeini returns to Iran, greeted by millions in the streets of Tehran and appoints Mehdi Bazargan prime minister.

1978-79 Revolution and founding of Islamic Republic

The Iranian Revolution which brought a sudden end to the Pahlavi dynasty defied all the myths of secular modernization, making the Islamic Republic the first theocratic state in the modern world to have institutionalized the idea of Velayat-e-faqih, or the "Rule of

the Jurist.” The Revolution replaced the monarchy with an Islamic Republic and a secular state with a quasi-theocracy. It brought new elites to power, altered the pattern of Iran's foreign relations, and led to the transfer of substantial wealth from private ownership to state control. There were continuities across the crisis of the Revolution, however; bureaucratic structure and behavior, attitudes toward authority and individual rights, and the arbitrary use of power remained much the same (Jahanbegloo 2004).

1980 January

Abolhasan Bani-Sadr is elected the first President of the Islamic Republic. His government begins work on a major nationalization program.

1980 July

Shah dies in Egypt

1980 September 22

Iraq invades Iran. This bloody war will last eight years

1981 January

The American hostages are released ending 444 days in captivity.

1981 June

Bani-Sadr is dismissed, he later flees to France.

1985

After the US and Soviet Union halted arms supplies, the US attempted to win the release of hostages in Lebanon by offering secret arms deals, this would later become known as the Iran-Contra affair.

1988 July

290 passengers and the crew of an Iran Air Airbus are mistakenly shot down by the USS Vincennes.

1988 July

Iran accepts a ceasefire agreement with Iraq following negotiations in Geneva under the aegis of the UN.

1988 August

Iran-Iraq war ceasefire. Over 1 million dead and 2 million wounded on both sides.

1989 February

Khomeini issues a death sentence against Salman Rushdie, the author of *The Satanic Verses*.

1989 June 3

Ayatollah Khomeini dies. On 4 June, President Khamene'i is appointed as new supreme leader

1989 August

Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani is sworn in as the new president.

1989 November

The US releases 567 million dollars of frozen Iranian assets.

1990 June

A major earthquake strikes Iran, killing approximately 40,000 people.

1990 Iran remains neutral following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

1990 September

Iran and Iraq resume diplomatic ties.

1995

US imposes oil and trade sanctions over Iran's alleged sponsorship of "terrorism", seeking to acquire nuclear arms and hostility to the Middle East process. Iran denies the charges.

1997 May

Mohammad Khatami wins the presidential election with 70% of the vote, beating the conservative ruling elite.

1998 September

Iran deploys thousands of troops on its border with Afghanistan after the Taleban admits killing eight Iranian diplomats and a journalist in Mazar-e Sharif.

Student protests

1999 July

Pro-democracy students at Tehran University demonstrate following the closure of the reformist newspaper 'Salam'. Clashes with security forces lead to six days of rioting and the arrest of more than 1,000 students.

2000 February

Majlis elections. Liberals and supporters of Khatami wrest control of parliament from conservatives for the first time.

2000 April

The judiciary, following the adoption of a new press law, bans the publication of 16 reformist newspapers.

2001 June

President Khatami re-elected.

2002 January

US President George Bush describes Iraq, Iran and North Korea as an "axis of evil", warning of the proliferation of long-range missiles being developed in these countries. The speech causes outrage in Iran and is condemned by reformists and conservatives alike.

2003 June

Thousands attend student-led protests in Tehran against clerical establishment.

2003 October

Shirin Ebadi becomes Iran's first Nobel Peace Prize winner; lawyer and human rights campaigner became Iran's first female judge in 1975 but was forced to resign after 1979 revolution.

2003 November

Iran says it is suspending its uranium enrichment program and will allow tougher UN inspections of its nuclear facilities. IAEA concludes there is no evidence of a weapons program.

2003 December

40,000 people are killed in an earthquake in south-east Iran; the city of Bam is devastated.

2004 February

Conservatives regain control of parliament in elections. Thousands of reformist candidates were disqualified by the hardline Council of Guardians before the polls.

2004 November

Iran agrees to suspend most of its uranium enrichment under a deal with the EU.

2005 June

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Tehran's ultra-conservative mayor, wins a run-off vote in presidential elections, defeating cleric and former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

2006 December

Iran hosts a controversial conference on the Holocaust; delegates include Holocaust deniers.

UN Security Council votes to impose sanctions on Iran's trade in sensitive nuclear materials and technology. Iran condemns the resolution and vows to speed up uranium enrichment work.

2007 March

Diplomatic stand-off with Britain after Iran detains 15 British sailors and marines patrolling the mouth of the Shatt al-Arab waterway separating Iran and Iraq.

2007 June

Protests erupt after government imposes petrol rationing amid fears of possible UN sanctions.

2007 October

U.S. announces sweeping new sanctions against Iran, the toughest since it first imposed sanctions almost 30 years ago.

2007 December

A new US intelligence report plays down the perceived nuclear threat posed by Iran.

2008 November

In an unprecedented move, President Ahmadinejad congratulates U.S. president-elect Barack Obama on his election win. Mr. Obama has offered to open unconditional dialogue with Iran about its nuclear program.

2009 February

Speaking on the 30th anniversary of the Islamic revolution in Iran, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad says he would welcome talks with the US as long as they are based on "mutual respect".

2009 March

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei tells anti-Israel rally that US President Obama is following the "same misguided track" in Middle East as President Bush.

2009 April

An Iranian court finds Iranian-American journalist Roxana Saberi guilty of spying for the US. She is sentenced to eight years in prison.

2009 May

Iran rejects a US state department report saying it remains the "most active state sponsor of terrorism" in the world.

Jailed Iranian-American journalist Roxana Saberi is freed and returns to US.

2009 June

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is declared to have won a resounding victory in the 12 June presidential election. The rival candidates challenge the result, alleging vote-rigging. Their supporters take to the streets, and at least 30 people are killed and more than 1,000 arrested in the wave of protests that follow.

The Iranian authorities claim foreign interference is stoking the unrest, and single out Britain for criticism.

2009 August

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sworn in for second term as president presents cabinet - the first since the founding of the Islamic Republic in 1979 to include women.

A number of senior opposition figures are accused of conspiring with foreign powers to organize unrest and are put on trial.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei says there is no proof that opposition leaders blamed for the post-election unrest were agents of foreign powers.

Missile tests

2010 February

Iran says it is ready to send enriched uranium abroad for further enrichment under a deal agreed with the West. The US calls on Tehran to match its words with actions.

Opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi says the opposition will continue its peaceful struggle against the government.

2010 July

International outcry as a woman is sentenced to death by stoning for adultery.

27 killed as suicide bombers attack a Shia mosque in Zahedan near the Pakistan border.

2010 September

Sarah Shourd, a US citizen caught hiking with two friends near the Iran-Iraq border, is freed after a year in prison. The three deny they were spying.

US imposes unprecedented sanctions against eight senior Iranian officials for human rights violations.

2011 February

First mass opposition demonstrations in a year amid a wave of unrest rippling across the Middle East and North Africa.

Iran sends two warships through Suez Canal for first time since the Islamic Revolution, in what Israel describes as an act of provocation.

2011 August

Two US citizens arrested on the Iran-Iraq border in 2009 are found guilty of spying and sentenced to eight years in prison.

2011 October

The US accuses Iran of being behind an alleged plot to kill the Saudi ambassador to Washington. Tehran rejects the charges as part of an American propaganda campaign.

2011 November/December

Protesters attack the British embassy in Tehran after London imposes tighter economic sanctions. Britain evacuates its diplomatic staff and expels all Iranian diplomats, but ties are not severed.

2012 January

U.S. imposes sanctions on Iran's central bank, the main clearing-house for its oil export profits. Iranian threatens to block the transport of oil through the Strait of Hormuz.

2012 March-May

Supporters of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei beat those of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in parliamentary polls boycotted by pro-reform groups.

2012 July

European Union boycott of Iranian oil exports comes into effect.

2012 September

Canada breaks off diplomatic relations over Iran's nuclear program and support for the Assad government in Syria.

2012 October

Iran's rial currency falls to a new record low against the US dollar, having lost about 80% of its value since 2011 because of international sanctions. Riot police attack about 100 currency traders outside the Central Bank. EU countries announce further sanctions against Iran over its nuclear program, focusing on banks, trade and crucial gas imports.

## Appendix 2 Life History Discussion Guide

### Life History Discussion Guide Developed October 2011

#### Background/Demographic

1. Age
2. Marital Status
3. Children
4. Job/occupation
5. Household info

#### Life in Iran

1. Where born
2. Family
3. Education
4. Occupation
5. Activities
6. What it meant to be an Iranian there
7. Mapping identity/ies in Iran
8. Idea/notions of U.S.
9. What made you interested in politics?
10. Diagram a typical day

#### Life in San Diego

1. Family
2. Occupation
3. Activities
4. Social life
5. What it means to be an Iranian here
6. Diagram a typical day  
→ potential opportunity for participant observation.: one thing to observe is how much time spent online engaged in political activity, etc

#### Cultural traditions

1. National
2. Ethnic/racial
3. Familial
4. Class/education
5. Religious/spiritual
6. Other?
7. Media worlds typical in a given week  
→ favorite online sites, books, T.V., magazines, etc? How do these connect directly and indirectly to your actual social world and multiple cultural traditions.



Do you ground your life in certain philosophical or political meanings or ideologies?  
Where do these values come from? Are there any conflicts?

Imagine 10 years into the future for yourself? What's a good future, a bad future?  
Imagine a future for Iran in 10 years. What's a good future, a bad future?

### **Appendix 3 Case Study: Reactions to June 2009 and Feelings about Green Movement through Time**

Though a big issue was made of the Green Movement (Jonbesh Rahe Sabz) after the June 2009 movement, and indeed it incited diaspora activist support in the U.S. and around Iranian diaspora communities worldwide. In the popular press, we saw students adorning themselves with green-colored paraphernalia (scarves, flag, the word, the color on anything), three years after these events it seem a promise unfulfilled. Green was initially the symbol used for Mir Hossein Mousavi's campaign but after the election it becomes a symbol of hope and unity for those seeking a different outcome. As columnist and journalist Shirin Sadeghi wrote two years after the elections,

Even outside of Iran, if you attend rallies claiming to be of the Green Movement, many of them are actually rallies against the Islamic regime. Some of the speakers openly address the fact that the Iranians do not want more figures from that regime, they do not want the Green Movement's leaders, they want the whole regime to be replaced with a government that is elected by the people.<sup>114</sup>

This characterizes how the majority of my informants felt about the Green Movement specifically. They all attended support rallies locally during the most active part of the Green Movement, and were surprised at the numbers and kinds of other Iranians participating. Yet, later they experienced disillusionment with the movement as members of the younger generation, or never really believed it signified meaningful change in Iran as members of the older generation of migrants who had been in the U.S. longer. Mohsen was the outlier in his attitudes about June 2009 and the Green Movement.

Niki, a college student at a public university in her early twenties, exemplifies what might be a typical reaction to the Green Movement among 1.5 and second generation Iranian-Americans longitudinally through time. I first interviewed Niki June

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<sup>114</sup> Iran's Green Movement Lie. June 20, 2011. Huffington Post.

2011 and asked her to reflect back on her initial reaction to the June 2009 events and what the momentum of the Green Movement meant to her at the time, then she mentioned the green Movement again in the news stories she currently follows. Finally, I re-interviewed her again February 2012. In her statements, we can see her opinions about the Green movement changing from positive and inspirational to reflecting doubt and misgivings. It is important to note that Niki, unlike almost all of the other informants, was actually visiting family in Iran when the presidential election took place.

Interviewed June 24, 2011-- Reflecting back to June 2009. We can hear that Niki was inspired, excited, and felt pride and a sense of connection for those participating in the rallies, even in the midst of hearing cynical comments from other family members.

Niki: A lot of it was excitement, and I wasn't sure what was going to happen tomorrow. I was really excited as to, maybe there's a better tomorrow for the people of Iran. I was really hopeful. I became a little bit jaded after watching the political debates between my family saying nothings going to happen. And a lot of people were completely cynical about it. So a lot of excitement, especially in the beginning. A lot of fear, I wasn't sure what would happen. People were telling me: "Oh don't take your camera out. You know, don't wear green. Don't look the guards in the eyes. Don't say anything because you don't know who's a spy, you don't know if the guards are going to start randomly shooting into crowds. A lot of fear. A lot of inspiration. I would say I was extremely inspired by...[I felt a sense of pride] Even if I wasn't participating in the protests and the rallies, that I kind of felt that these people were my brothers and sisters, and they were so incredibly brave for doing what they did. I was really inspired. Before that I was considering a career in journalism and after that I became a lot more inspired to write about these things and to be involved in these things. So inspiration was a huge part of it and I think that was the most lasting reaction, is the inspiration of it.

**June 2011**—In answering a question about which news stories she currently follows, Niki shows that the Green Movement has become, at this point, the bottom of the list of just another news story from Iran she tries to stay abreast of.

Niki: I actually actively follow any kind of situation regarding stoning. That's the thing that I am really concerned about. Like, stoning as a form of execution. So I read up on that any time it's going on. I, there was a situation Sakineh Ashtiani, who, that was a very high profile case, so I was following that last summer, every single day. I did what I could to get people to sign a petition to make sure it didn't happen. That's something I follow. Women's rights is something that I follow a lot of. And, even [when I visit Iran] I talk a lot about. So women's, any kind of women's rights situation. I follow the hikers, the detained hikers who have been pretty much hostages for an extended period of time. What else? I followed the case of Nasrin Sotoudeh, who was [a human rights lawyer] that was jailed for her activity. That's mostly what I follow. And of course, trying to see if the Green Movement is, is moving forward in any sort of way.

**February 2012**—In a conversation where she contrasts her parents more traditional values and the socially liberal ones Niki says she espouses, she mentions her parents' attitudes about the Green Movement. While still calling it “admirable”, Niki admits to being skeptical about it. Yet the overall tone of the following passage is one where she sees it as the most viable option for political change in Iran

Niki: I would say I am also skeptical, just not to their extent. I am skeptical of the green movement. I'm suspicious of certain, certain people that join its ranks. Just because of the experience that Iran has with revolutionary activity. However, I do feel there is something to be said to the viability, about the viability of a movement that wants to change from the inside out, rather than a very unpredictable coup or an overthrow. And, I think that's a very strong point that the green movement has that could be a key to its success. Is that it wants to go in from the inside-out and maintain the traditional roots of the Islamic republic. Doesn't want to ignite those anti-imperialist sentiments that liberal movements in Iran often do. And, through that kind of traditionalist and nativist mentality, being able to affect the government, I think that's like, that gives it a lot of strength.

**February 2012**—In describing a fallout with a student organization with which she had previously been active, Niki, while drawing an analogy to the 1979 Iranian Revolution, admits that differences in opinion about the meaning and vitality of the Green Movement were what caused the conflict with other members of the group:

Niki: It's kind of hard for me to remember [what caused the conflict]. It was usually small things. I - I think that it's really important to constantly analyze and observe the green movement because I don't, I would hate for it to become, kind of like what the 1979 revolution was. It was very much changed when the revolution actually manifested itself, because the group that was calling for the revolution was no longer representative of what people wanted.

And, I think that the Green Movement is very, very vulnerable to that. And, I think that we have to be willing to stand back every now and then and say, "do I still support this group of people? Are they still holding to the ideals that we believe to? Are they still looking for the same things that we are?" Just to make sure that we're not supporting a cause that's no longer a cause, the cause that we originally supported. And, I would say that we need to analyze certain figures, and be like, "Is this figure really, like, a good person? Is this person really, like, someone that we want to endorse?" just for the sake of making sure that you know, we're not getting, we're getting ourselves into something that we are completely aware of. And, I think people were offended by that because they would feel that I'm not really supportive of civil rights, or human rights, or democracy.

Maliheh, a member of the 1.5 generation, recounts the excitement of the events, and feeling of it "slowly fading" over time.

Maliheh Right. I remember that, my reaction mostly was just like excited anticipation of what I was sure was going to happen. That Mousavi was going to win and all these great changes that were gonna happen. And I was, also my reaction to a lot of the, a lot of the debates and so on was that, I mean I was impressed, I was shocked that I actually cared about all this stuff. I'm not really like that politically, I guess, involved. Or I wasn't. But I remember that I was keenly reading the news, I watched the debates. And I, before the elections it was all very exciting. We would talk to family in Iran like very often and catch up. But after, I mean in the weeks after it, it was also just crazy how, I remember I would go on CNN like everyday it was like the front page of CNN. Or whatever news channel. Yahoo even was about the Irani protest and so on. And I remember that like I was so excited. You would see all these magazines. The times would have the comparison of the Islamic Revolution and like the pictures that they have now. Like juxtapose them kind of. And I was so excited, I thought like this is gonna happen actually. And that feeling kinda slowly faded off, obviously because you would see the more real side of things and how yes this huge part of the population is doing this but it's not the entire population. And also I remember getting in debates with people here who I never thought and Iranian in America would be pro- Ahmadinejad and I encountered a few of them. Some of which were close family

friends.

Tina Oh wow.

Maliheh It was just very odd. They were very educated people. And I just, it was so odd to have them say things like that or support Ahmandinejad. So I remember I would get pretty frustrated with that too. That's essentially, yeah.

Tina So, let me just go back. So when you said you were so excited because you thought maybe something was going to change this time but then, you know, some reality struck in. What was it that made you think that maybe it wasn't gonna change or what did you see specifically?

Maliheh I think when the protests kind of died down a little bit or when their government forces. When they were really just like not allowing the protests to continue. I guess when I saw fewer people partake in the protests. And also actually when Mousavi was, I'm not sure, I don't remember if he was detained or if he was put under house arrest. But I remember something happened with one of the leaders and that was when we just thought, or in my mind it just seemed as if if one of the leaders can't do what he's gonna do then people don't know who to follow. So it's not gonna get anywhere. And also just thinking about the Islamic Revolution, like Khamenei was like this powerful leader who people relied on, people loved, and so on. So that was necessary. And if the green movement leaders couldn't continue their work it just seemed like it was gonna fail.

Tina Okay, so you sort of see it as a problem of leadership. Saw it as a problem of leadership. And sort of not a real strong central person to rally around maybe.

Maliheh Yeah. Yes. And I also I was not as sure that this was a movement that everybody in Iran wanted. And this was yeah.

Tina So because, because you realized that maybe it wasn't that everybody was on this boat did it make you doubt the legitimacy of the movement or the right, the position of the movement of being sort of the right or correct way to go? Or just that it wouldn't be successful because it didn't have enough people backing it?

Maliheh Right. So at that time I didn't doubt the legitimacy of the movement or how it was right. But I mean later I have. Especially recently, and especially with my involvement with HRI. Just because, at that time I just thought there are all these pro-government, you know, very lowly educated, I guess lower class portion of the Iranian community in Iran that is, that takes Khamenei as a divine ruler of kinds and like actually believes that. And that's how it is. And obviously the green movement is the right way to go because you know the Green Movement is taking things very. I mean at that time I thought it was the right thing to do. And I thought that the ideals of the green movement were right. Which I think I still do believe but with the involvement of HRI actually I got to see what a wide, like the Green Movement seems to be kind of an umbrella for anyone who is not, who in any way doesn't like the Iranian government and may it be, I

guess, pro-marxist Iranian Americans, may it be communist Iranian Americans, and so on and so forth. And I guess to me that just seems unrealistic that all of these groups are going to get what they want.

Mohsen, who arrived to the U.S. in 2008 was the most impacted through time by the events, and remains energized. He regrets not being able to physically be in Iran during the 2009 summer events.

Tina So, so, was that what happened, how did you witness what was happening during that, during that summer in June 2009? How did you did your information?

Mohsen I was not lucky to be there. Really, in those days I was wishing that I was in Iran

Tina Oh really?

Mohsen Yeah. But, I was checking it here. Through Facebook, through CNN, with chat.

Tina So you were saying you were wishing you were there.

Mohsen Yeah, I was wishing I was there. But, unfortunately I couldn't. I followed it through Facebook mostly, and CNN was, you know, reporting from Iran in those days. And, after they not let the reporters to report anything else out of Iran it was only Facebook. I was all the time by my laptop, checking the Facebook.

Tina And, that, were you checking Facebook for things that people from Iran were posting?

Mohsen Yeah. What was happening, videos.

Tina And these were your friends, your Facebook friends, or also other people that were reposting? I mean, how -

Mohsen Usually, it was, no, it was not my friends because my friends, none of them was going to, to, to demonstrations. But, it was something shared, you'd receive it and send it to others. But, the thing is that in my Facebook friends a lot of things changed. The people that I was never thinking that they would do such a thing, they will share this kind of post, they will you know care about these kind of things, about political matters, they a lot of them has changed.

Tina What do you mean?

Mohsen I mean that, as I said, I had so many friends. I know them in Iran, these Facebook friends, I know them, they are not. And they are, they were not political people. They were only living their life. And, some of them even don't care about anything else. Still some of them are like that. But, some of them has changed.

Tina Because of that?

Mohsen Because of those days in Iran. Because they saw what happened in Iran, they saw people killed in the streets, they saw these things. They have

changed. They are angry with the government. They are posting these things still because it is, it is, it is dangerous for the people who are living in Iran to post these kind of things. But they are doing that. And, they are not young. This is the second point, you know, young people doing lots of crazy things. They don't think about, you know. But people in my generation, they have family, they have life, and they don't want to risk, usually they don't want to risk it. But they are doing it in Iran and it is a change. I can see that change. Also, some young people that, as I said, they were not in political issue, they don't care about it, they just wanted to have thier party. Now they have changed, lot of them.

Tina And these are young people in Iran?

Mohsen Yes.

Tina Or young people here too?

Mohsen No. Here, I was not here before this things happened. Young people in Iran.

Tina Mmhm. People that you knew and knew who they were

Mohsen Yeah.

Ramin, a member of the post-Revolution generation of migrants, was much more succinct in his answer about his activities and responses to June 2009, with the perspective that “people have cooled off now.”

Tina So what, how would you describe what was happening, how you would react, how you were reacting around, June 2009 with

Ramin The election? Yeah, the election was a very big news, and not only Iranians the non Iranians they followed that too. And uh, I think that, that this of another? Eh, that figured many many people to look into the (?) election. I don't think that anybody was happy at that terrible scene and I think from her desk, most Iranian they were very much interested to know what is happening, what's going to come after that. Some people were thinking oh the government is going to be gone in three days, (inaudible) in five days, six days an and uh, we went with a lot of demonstrations at night and I was surprised by seeing how many Iranians are are participating in demonstrations.

Tina Demonstrations locally?

Ramin Locally, yeah in San Diego.

Tina And did you participate any

Ramin I did participate in some, not in all of them.

Tina Who was organizing them?

Ramin uh, ... I think a new group was formed. The name Iran Peace

Tina I heard of that

Ramin Yeah

Tina But I don't know if they are active anymore?



Ramin

They are not active anymore, I think they were just a group of Iranians that they thought they could eh organize this event but by the time things cooled off, I think they cooled off too. It wasn't any permanent structure I believe.

And eh, And after the green movement everything cooled off and I think people have cooled off too.

## Appendix 4 Full Text of Iranian.com Selected Blog Posts

### *The Good American: Why the Iranian-American Community Will Never Advance*

Posted by Anonymous, September 3, 2012

About a month ago, there was a [post](#) on IC about Texas Representative, and the perennial Republican presidential candidate, Ron Paul voicing his opposition to the latest round of sanctions against the Islamic Republic. Immediately after the post appeared on this page, an IC member posted a comment describing Mr. Paul as a “good American,” and another U.S. representative as a “bad American.” The commenter’s sole criterion for making those determinations was Paul’s stance on the issue of sanctions against Iran, and nothing else.

This post is not about that specific commenter, but rather about the larger picture and many other Iranians who think like him. I am sure that you all have met Iranians who blindly support Ron Paul because of his foreign policy positions and nothing else. And that, in and of itself, speaks great volumes as to why the Iranian American community lacks political power in the U.S. despite its large, educated and comparatively wealthy ranks.

Ron Paul, as POTUS, will be an absolute disaster for the United States—and especially for minorities in the United States, such as (if you haven’t figured it out) Iranians. The man [has confirmed connections to white supremacist groups](#). This means that if he ever becomes president, Iranians will be on top of his “target list” of discriminatory practices. He will probably take their citizenships away. Paul is also for [no gun control](#). In a “Paul world” America will turn into the Wild West, with people packing AK-47s on the streets (and [hopefully for his supporters] targeting those brown skinned A-Rabs]). He also had other ideas, such as getting rid of the Department of Education, which will cause disparate and substandard education across the country, and most importantly for Iranian immigrants, he is [against birthright citizenship for U.S. born children of immigrants](#). This, in and of itself, should give pause to any immigrant. This means that under a Ron Paul presidency, many Iranian Americans who were born in the United States will lose their citizenship. This will include those who have possibly never been to Iran. But Mr. Paul will deport them back to Eye-Ran, just to maintain his vision of a pristine white America.

But none of the above facts, and Ron Paul’s scary vision for America seems to bother his Iranian supporters. They have no issues with America being run by a racist and for their children losing their citizenship. Their only concern in the “old country” and the ability of mullahs to have access to the latest technology, free trade and lots of lots of petrodollars. And this, my friends, is the single most important reason why the Iranian American community will never advance.

Iranian Americans are too attached to the old country. The umbilical cord has not yet been cut. Their main focus should be the United States, but it’s not. It’s Iran. Learn from Sen. Daniel Inouye, who served in the United States military when it was at war with Japan, and when his own parents were being held at a Japanese internment camp. He went on to receive five medals, including the Medal of Honor and a Bronze Star. That’s how he showed his loyalty to the United States, and that’s how his

community gained influence by him becoming a United States senator. Can you imagine an Iranian American in a similar situation?!!! He would have probably suicide bombed a few places to show his “disapproval” of the war with Iran.

Remember: your American passport is not only for ease of travel to Dubai of your way to Iran for your annual chelo-kabab feasts. You took a loyalty oath to this country that should not be dismissed as “alaki.” And you’re not “zerang” for becoming U.S. citizens. This country trusted you. Don’t betray that trust. Also, remember this: you don’t know more than an average American just because you had a “revolution” back in 1979. Look at what that fiasco did to your homeland. If anything, your 1979 devolution is proof positive that you know absolutely nothing about running a country.

In sum, you cannot gain power and influence in this country by being a perpetual immigrant who psychologically lives out of a suitcase with the hopes of one day going back to your “own country” (as if the country that you’re supposedly a citizen of is not your own country). You cannot secretly (and sometimes not so secretly) hope for the demise for the demise of this country by supporting a nut like Ron Paul. You have to first show your loyalty to your adopted country, and once you have proven that loyalty and gained political influence, you can advocate for balanced policy that will benefit both the United States and the people (not the tyrannical government) of your country of origin. In the alternative, you can enjoy your kabab and torshi in Iran and complain about how you’re discriminated against in the land of the Great Satan.

**Response: “Anonymous - Iranian-Americans will be laughed off the Podium”**

Posted by ayatoilet1 on September 4, 2012

Its pointless to imagine that Iranians can get direct political power in the U.S. As I said at least 3 times - Iranian-Americans are NOT electable....unless of course they pretend to be American...with names like Sam or Fred. There are however, many other ways to gain political influence.

The one and only area where I agree with you is that Iranian-Americans have NOT united to utilize their power as a group to influence policies.

IT IS NOT that the jewish community has politicians in office that gives them power, its the simple fact that they are UNITED and when they see a politician act against their interests they pay for ads to defeat them, they finance opponents etc. They have influence because they actually vote in groups. AND they DO VOTE. Every single one of them is registered and votes. In some districts they make the "critical" difference in guaranteeing victories. When Harry Reid won Nevada with 200 votes, you bet - you absolutely bet -- he will suck upto groups that vote in blocks in that state. And you know who they are. What is disgusting is that TRITA PARSI - President for Life of the NIAC - is the representative of Iranian- Americans in the Media. He not even American (he is Swedish-Iranian).

Where Iranian-Americans have failed is NOT that they do not have professional politicians. Its that they have NOT united to establish real influence. Unity is political power. NOT having your own kind in office. You need to understand that.

In fact, I would even go an extra step and say that the Jewish community made a big mistake supporting Lieberman as VP to Al Gore. As a minority, having "visible" influence is a big mistake. Influence needs to be much more subtle. If in fact the US gets into a bad (very bad) economic conditions, these Hicks will make Hitler look like a

poodle. It will NOT take a lot of thinking for Americans to realize that 2% of Americans (Jews) own something like 80% of U.S. net worth (wealth) ... and they have monopolized political power in the U.S. (And by the way, I am not saying that this type of thinking is correct, but its a real risk the Jewish community is taking).

So lets stop focusing on getting Iranian elected, but focus on uniting and developing subtle influence. Where I totally agree with you is that this lack of Unity is a failure of the Iranian-American community.

But otherwise, advancement is NOT getting into political office, changing your name, or selling out. Advancement means having integrity, valuing your heritage, learning about your heritage, and preserving and Iranian Dream. If getting into political office means selling out - then its not for Iranian-Americans. In the current political environment - I am afraid, anyone who stands with their full Iranian Name, looking as an Iranian ... would be laughed off the podium.

**Response: “Zendanian - I believe that you may have misunderstood me”**

by Anonymous Observer on September 4, 2012

I would like to have a discussion as to why Iranians have such high socioeconomic status in the U.S. but very little political power? Why the disconnect?

### ***Partition Iran?: Another Misguided Plan by southern California Congressman Dana Rohrabacher***

Posted by Touraj Daryaei, August 29, 2012

From time to time it is important that one provide a teach-in to nonacademics and educate those who promote wrong and harmful ideas. As a history professor I would like to teach a history lesson to [Mr. Dana Rohrabacher, the honorable Congressional Representative of California’s 46th District in Orange County](#) where I live and work. On July 26, 2012 Mr. Rohrabacher wrote a letter to the US Secretary of the State, Hillary Clinton, informing her that since the “people of Azerbaijan are geographically divided and many are calling for the reunification of their homeland after nearly two centuries of foreign rule,” the United States should help them reach that goal. He then goes on to say that: Russia and Persia divided the homeland of Azeris homeland in 1828, without their consent. “The Azerbaijan Republic won its independence in 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed,” continues the letter “Now it is time for the Azeris in Iran to win their freedom too.” Finally, Rohrabacher states: “Aiding the legitimate aspirations of the Azeri people for independence is a worthy cause in and of itself...yet, it also poses a greater danger to the Iranian tyrants than the threat of bombing its underground nuclear research bunkers.” Obviously Mr. Rohrabacher is concerned with the immediate issues at hand in the Middle East and the interests of the US and Israel in a very twisted way, because he calls the MEK (Mojahedin Khalq Organization, an Iranian exile group on the US terrorist list), “Israel’s Friends.” This obviously demonstrates Mr. Rohrabacher’s political stance and the influence of its supporters which is detrimental to the US policy in the Middle East. This short sightedness and lack of knowledge about the region and its history is

indeed exactly the reason for which the US has gotten involved in the Middle East (Iraq and Afghanistan), which has bankrupted us. The question is how this kind of interference in different countries and plan of dismantling nation-states, recognized by the UN would help the US? Or does it simply just help other countries in the region? Well, the short answer is that it doesn't help a bit! Last time I checked, it was the work of colonial powers in the nineteenth century which created and divided countries in Middle East. Even in Orange County it is taught that such ideas and actions were evil and has caused problems in the world for the past two centuries. It has been a long time since any country has thought of such colonial plans.

Mr. Rohrabacher states that the Azeri people have been divided for the past two centuries by Russia and Persia in 1828 (I wonder how much travel he has had in the Republic of Azerbaijan and Iran's province of Azarbijan to make such a claim). Just a short glance in any preparatory college world history book will make it clear that the territory he is discussing was part of Iran (known as Persia then), which was invaded by Russians in 1828 and annexed through a peace treaty. But what is important is that the territory that Imperial Russia took as part of her victory over the Persians was never called Azarbijan. It was the Soviet strongman, Stalin who in order to meddle in Iran's affairs renamed the region of Arran (historical ancient Albania) as Azerbaijan as a thorn on the side of Iran and those allies who disagreed with the USSR, namely US and the UK. It seems Mr. Rohrabacher is following Stalin's footsteps!

As an ancient historian I am also tempted to give Mr. Rohrabacher a history lesson about the very ancient past. The name Azarbijan (Turkified as Azerbaijan), comes from the name of the last Satrap (Persian word now existing in English, check it in any good dictionary) of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, named Aturpat, in the 4th Century BCE. His family stayed on as local rulers even after Alexander the Great's conquest and hence the region became known as Azarbijan (Old Persian Aturpatakan). The Old Persian terms mean "Protector of Fire." This, however, is only the region south of the Aras River (Iranian Azarbijan), while to the north; Arran was named Azerbaijan by Stalin. The Republic of Azerbaijan is a twentieth century creation. Hence, there was never historically a unity or connection between the two. The region was Turkified in the medieval period and that is just one more ethnic group among many others in the modern nation-state of Iran and beyond.

But Mr. Rohrabacher should also be told that it was the Azaris of Iran and Arran who in fact invented modern ideas of Iranian nationalism. Akhundzadeh, known in the Republic of Azerbaijan as Akhundof, a national hero is the man who perpetuated the intellectual movement behind the idea of the greatness of Iran. Since then, many if not most Iranian statesmen and intellectuals have been of Azari background (Ayatollah Khamenei and the previous presidential candidate Mir-Hosseini Mousavi are both from Iranian Azarbijan). Many of the most famous Iranian historians, linguists and scholars in modern times have also been ethnically Azari, but none have called for such a separation. I don't know why Mr. Rohrabacher and his handful of friends (Mojahedin Khalgh in Washington who are spending money trying to buy congressmen and congresswomen, along with Israel), are making such nonsensical statements. They are both incorrect and historically inaccurate. Furthermore, the Iranian Azarbijan is not only inhabited by Turkic speaking, but also Kurdish people as well as the Christian Assyrian and few remaining Armenians. Mr. Rohrabacher should read a bit on the consequence of promoting a single ethnicity in a

multi-ethnic areas and nation-state such as Iran. Lessons from Kosovo and Serbia-Bosnia Herzegovina, as well as Armenia-Azerbaijan wars among other, places have shown that such ethnic divisions leads to ethnic cleansing and horrific acts of violence. Iran has been a multi-ethnic civilization for the past 2500 years. It is people like Mr. Rohrabacher who have fallen into the trap of Israel and the Mojahedin Khalgh who seek such divisions for their own opportunistic aims.

US involvement in the Middle East, particularly in Iran in the twentieth century, with a highlight of US backed coup in 1953 which dethroned the only democratically elected prime minister in that nation's history has made the modern Iran as it is today. I am sure the congressman has heard of the term "blowback," meaning any shortsighted action could lead to long-term problems in the Middle East and for the US. It should be a lesson to Mr. Rohrabacher to stay out of Iranian affairs and concentrate on unemployment, the broken educational system and poverty in his own county. He is needed more here in Orange County where things are falling apart. His similar ideas about partitioning Afghanistan have made him persona non grata in that country. Let's save California, before others begin to call for its secession from the US!

*First published in counterpunch.org.*

### **Response: "Rohrabacher is a Republican Ignoramus"**

By Ayatoilet1 on August 30, 2012

If the Iranian expat community had real balls (like AIPAC does in the U.S.), we would run radio ads in his district calling him out as an ignoramus. Just like AIPAC does, anyone who is against Israel - they spend lavishly to defeat. And we Iranian-Americans can do the very same....anyone who decries Iranian territorial integrity - we can go after. You know the cost would be something like \$2000 ....almost nothing. The problem is there isn't a single organization that is willing to do that. That is the shame and embarrassment of all these Iranian-American organizations. We really need to call out - idiots - with negative policies vis-a-vis Iran. We must simultaneously demand change in Iran, while protecting Iranian territorial integrity. "

### **Response: "Freedom and Independence for South Azaerbaijan"**

By Savalan on August 30, 2012

According to the UN anti-racism panel statement "Azeri communities were notably subjected to "stereotyped and demeaning" portrayals in the media, while ethnic or religious minorities faced "limited enjoyment of political, economic, social and cultural rights." For over 80 years, all non-Persian minorities in Iran have been victims of serious human rights violations. They have endured racial discrimination, forced assimilation, suppression of their language and culture under both the Pahlavi and Islamic governments. South Azerbaijanis in Iran well might be a numerical majority but is kept in a minority situation in terms of access to power and resources. Since early childhood, I have been exposed to the racial discrimination against the ethnic group into which I was born. As a school boy, I was not allowed to speak my mother tongue, Azerbaijani Turkic. I never saw text books written in my language. I was not taught to read and write my language or learn about my culture and history. As Iran's only official language Farsi, the Persian language was imposed on us. We were forced to learn Persian language, Persian history, and Persian culture as the common identity of all Iranians. I have experienced my ethnic group routinely and openly insulted on radio, television and in the state run

national press. Even now, my people are depicted as intellectually challenged and are dehumanized as “donkeys” and cockroaches”. Racial discrimination is still with us. Banning of all non-Farsi languages continues, ethnic groups, particularly Turks and Semites are dehumanized. Iranian regimes have been the biggest threat to the realization of human rights for Azerbaijanis in Iran. Paralleling the internal repression by the government, the Azerbaijani struggle is ignored by the international community and remains invisible to western media such as the BBC, and European broadcasts in Persian. Even Iranian human rights activists often fail to mention Azerbaijanis and other minorities when they speak of human right violations in Iran. “-Savalan

## ***SnakeCharmer's Posts on Iranian.com***

The following comments were posted by me as my avatar, SnakeCharmer, in an effort to generate ideas about political discourse on Iranian.com. I selected threads that had something to do with Iranian participation in broader civic and political sphere of U.S. or remarked something about the nature of discussion on Iranian.com

### **Back to the "disconnect" comment**

by [SnakeCharmer](#) posted on September 7, 2012

hi,

I'm new here. I've been reading this thread for the last few days with fascination. The level of political talk and discourse (and to be sure lots of dissent and argumentation) offered here at IC far outpaces what I observe in the "real world" among Iranians in the diaspora.

What gives?

### **Can someone enlighten me?**

by [SnakeCharmer](#) posted on October 18, 2012

Can someone comment or enlighten me as a recent newcomer to IC on the "good old days" of IC? Like maybe exactly when that was, and how it was different from now?

Thanks to the person who linked to JJ's post from early 2010 about 2009 most popular features. I would be interested in looking at similar stats from other years as a comparative. I emailed site admin a few weeks back about this but didn't hear from them.

Charting numbers is one way to compare the viability of this forum for true and open discourse, but I am interested in hearing from "old-timers" how (and if) it was qualitatively different?

I am researching the content of IC as part of a larger study on political discourse among Iranians in the diaspora, just as background as to why I am interested.

thanx



## Glossary of Terms and Acronyms

### Terms

**Bahá'í-** a monotheistic religion founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Iran by the prophet Bahá'u'lláh. The Bahai Faith is now spread worldwide, with adherents coming from every ethnic group and culture, and comprises a global religious community. The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh emphasize the unity of humanity. The Bahá'í Faith is one of the religious minority groups persecuted in Iran.

**Cha'i-** hot tea. Several rounds of cha'i are served and shared during any meyhmooni. Proper cha'i exchange involves an assortment of pastries and sweets.

**Chaharshanbeh Soori-** An ancient celebration dating back to the pre-Islamic era (Zoroastrian). The “festival of fire” takes place the evening before the last Wednesday of Iranian year, and involves lighting huge bonfires. Participants jump over the fires as a purification rite in preparation for the new year.  
Hijab

**Hijab/Hejab-** a veil worn by Muslim women which covers the hair and neck

**Meyhmooni-** Literally means party, wedding, birthday, etc. but in reality any social visit with food. When people speak of meyhmooni they mean visiting other people's houses to share a meal, or having guests over at their house.

**Mujahideen-e-Khalq,** the People's Mujahideen of Iran, also called the MEK, is an Islamic and Marxist political mass movement. MEK participated in the 1979 Revolution to overthrow the Shah, and now as an opposition movement in exile advocates to overthrow the Islamic Republic. MEK, as of September 21, 2012, was removed from the U.S. list of terrorist organizations by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. MEK is rumored to have many followers/members in the U.S.

**Nowruz-** a Persian rite celebrating the New Year which takes place the first day of spring. In San Diego, and other sites of settlement it means extra parties and chances for meyhmooni. There is a host of activities before Nowruz, like cleaning your house, buying new clothes and participating in Chaharshanbeh Soori, as well as activities after Nowruz, such as Sizdeh Bidar.

**Sofreh-** a tablecloth or mat on the ground for a picnic

**Sizdeh Bidar-** literally means the “thirteenth outside” and occurs on the thirteenth day of the New Year in the Iranian calendar, and involves an all-day picnic outdoors.

**Ta'arof-** an Iranian cultural concept encompassing a wide range of behaviors and contexts, and is the name given for the Iranian cultural model governing the etiquette for

civility and reciprocity. Characterized by indirect and polite language. In speaking, self-deference is emphasized, at the same time as elevating the rank of the other party. Ta'arof governs ruled of etiquette and exchange between speakers, in negotiation, and hospitality.

**Zoroastrianism-** The pre-Islamic religion of Iran. Zoroastrianism is a religion and philosophy based on the teachings of the prophet Zoroaster, who preached sometime between 1800 and 1000 B.C. Cited as one of the world's first monotheistic religions. After the Arab conquest of Iran in 7<sup>th</sup> century, Zoroastrians were persecuted and largely converted to Islam. Zoroastrian rites of season are still practiced among Iranians.

### **Acronyms**

AIAP=Association of Iranian American Professionals

EGBO= Ethnic Grassroots-Based Organizations

FB= Facebook

HRI= Human Rights for Iran

IAY= Iranian American Youth+

IC= Iranian.com

ISSD= Iranian School of San Diego

ISTA=Iranian Students' Association

IRI= Islamic Republic of Iran

PCC= Persian Cultural Center

VE= Virtual ethnography

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