IRANIAN AMERICANS: A COMMUNITY PORTRAIT

Presented by

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University of Houston-Downtown

Michigan Iranian-American Oral History Project
Lecture Series
2016-17 Events
Data was collected in two phases:

1. 1993-1995 Iranian community in Dallas
   - Ethnographic fieldwork & participant observation
   - 485 Survey (distributed 3,500)
   - 40 fact-to-face Interviews with first-generation Iranians in Dallas
SECOND PHASE OF DATA COLLECTION
2003-2005 Iranian communities in Dallas, Houston, and Austin

- Ethnographic fieldwork & participant observation
- 507 Surveys from the first-generation Iranians (distributed 6,000)
- 42 fact-to-face interviews with first-generations in Houston
- 105 Surveys from the second-generations (distributed 800)
- 15 face-to-face interviews & 2 focus group discussions with second-generation Iranians
OTHER SOURCES OF DATA

1. Immigration and Naturalization’s Statistical Yearbook (1960-2008)


3. Content Analysis of 150 articles printed in Dallas Morning News and Houston Post
MAIN THEORETICAL OBJECTIVES OF THE PRESENTATION

- To demonstrate inadequate application of the assimilationist model of immigration to the case of Iranians and the emphasis on cultural adaptation, adjustment, and assimilation.
- Emphasize conditions of host society at the time of arrival of immigrants.
- Show the links between the home and host societies (Iran and the U.S.) and the impact of U.S.-Iran political tensions on Iranian immigrants.
MAIN THEORETICAL OBJECTIVES OF THE PRESENTATION

- Show the importance of the context of political relations between sending and receiving countries, rather than focusing primarily on issues of human capital and cultural practices of migrants within their host societies.

- Demonstrate politics of migration in the U.S. and the way Iranians have negotiated place, identity, and discriminatory politics.

- To document contentious political relationship between the U.S. and Iran, distorted media images and stereotypes of Iranians and the profiling and discriminatory policies that were put in to effect first during the Iran hostage crisis from 1979 to 1981 and later, after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States.
MAIN THEORETICAL OBJECTIVES OF THE PRESENTATION

- Demonstrate how U.S. immigration policies combined with the negative media images of Iranians and Muslims have hindered Iranian ethnic and political identity formation in the U.S., and negatively affected the attitudes of many Iranians toward the U.S. government and Americans in general.
- Show the division among Iranians in terms of national, political, and cultural identity in this country.
- Show stigma management among Iranians such as avoiding speaking Persian in public places, hiding the fact that they are from Iran, or by simply calling themselves “Persian” rather than Iranian
# Iranian Immigrants in the United States Before the Revolution

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<tr>
<td><strong>Attitude toward Iranians</strong></td>
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<td>policy, Issuing visa to students, tourists,</td>
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| **U.S.-Iran Relations**     | Very negative and hostile: No diplomatic relations, economic embargo against Iran  
Negative: “Fanatic, terrorist country dominated by crazy group of mullahs,” & “Axis of Evil”  
Suspicious terrorist group |
| **Image of Iran & Iranians**|                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
Hostage Crisis 1979
1979 AMERICAN HOSTAGE REACTION

Mohsen M. Mobasher, Associate Professor of Anthropology & Sociology at UHD
POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SANCTIONS AGAINST IRAN AND IRANIAN IMMIGRANTS

1. Expulsion of diplomats and military trainees
2. Trade sanctions against Iran
3. Freeze of all Iranian government assets
4. Tight restrictions on visas for Iranian applicants
   - Iranians were allowed to enter the U.S. only for medical emergencies or political asylum
5. Cancellation of visas issued to Iranian
Iranians’ Attitudes toward Americans and Feelings about Living in the United States: Survey Results

My Survey of Iranians in Texas (N=507)

- Do you feel attached to American society and culture:
  - 80% Never or very little.
  - 20% of first generations feel strongly attached.

- 2 out of every 3 felt like foreigners and outsiders in the U.S.

- Close to 62% had no or very little friendship associations with Americans outside of the workplace.

How do we explain these feelings? Let us look at the U.S.-Iran political relationship and migration history of Iranians and...
IRANIANS AND EXPERIENCE OF DISCRIMINATION: SURVEY RESULTS

- **My Survey of Iranians in Texas (N=507)**
  - 40% experienced discrimination before and after 9/11 or both (50% before and after 9/11, 25% before, and 25% after 9/11)
  - 45% felt socially and politically insecure

- **Telephone Survey of 800 Iranians in CA in 2007**
  - 25% indicated they were singled out for special searches or questioning at an airport since 9/11
  - 43% reported denial of visa for family members or friends who intended to visit the U.S. after 9/11
  - 5% stated that they had been turned down for jobs
  - 12% reported general hostility from members of their community

- **Bendixen and Associates in 2002, CA**
  - 60% stated they had been victims of racial or ethnic discrimination more often after 9/11
  - 50% indicated they experienced more depression after 9/11
HOSTAGE CRISIS & AMERICAN BACKLASH AGAINST IRANIANS

- “Have a Happy Thanksgiving-Hold and Iranian Hostage”
- “Roast and Iranian for Thanksgiving”
- “Deport Iranians”
- “Send in Marines”
- “Death to Khomeini”
- “Eat Your Oil”
- “Bomb Iran”
- “Nuke Iran”
- “War with Iran”
- “We Don’t Take This Anymore”
- “Support Iran’s Revolution, Send an Iranian Home”
- “Go Home Dumb Iranians”
- “Give Americans Liberty or Give Iranians Death”
- “10 Iranians Equal a Worm”
- “60 Americans for 10,000 Iranian”
DISCRIMINATIONS AGAINST IRANIANS DURING AND AFTER THE HOSTAGE CRISIS

- Iranians received death threats
- Houston ISD board of trustees refused admittance of Iranian students
- The board of Greenville, a two-year college in SC voted to bar Iranian students from classes
- State Universities in LA and NM stopped enrolling Iranian students
- The Mississippi legislation passed a bill doubling the tuition for Iranian students
- Iranian businesses were boycotted
- Iranian students were asked to report to INS for an interview and to report their status and location
- 56,694 students reported to INS and 6,906 were deported
9/11
The Trauma of 9/11 and Resurgence of Prejudice and Discrimination against Iranians

- President Bush labeled Iran a terrorist sponsor country and part of an “axis of Evil.”
- Iranian immigrants encountered new waves of discrimination, hate crimes, employer and government profiling, and violations of their civil rights by both public and private sectors.
9/11 AND IRANIAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE US

NSEERS (National Security Entry Exist Registration System) process ordering males between ages 16 to 65 from 25 Middle Eastern countries including Iran who entered the US by September 10, 2002, to register with the INS, comply with the new federal alien registration program, and submit to being fingerprinted, photographed, and interrogated by federal agents or face deportation.

1,000 Iranians voluntarily registered, US immigration officials handcuffed, arrested, and detained between 500 and 700 men; they were not allowed access to attorneys, their families, or doctors.
# Iranian Immigrants in the United States: Before and After the Revolution

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<td><strong>Attitude toward Iranians</strong></td>
<td>Positive and receptive: non-exclusionary immigration policy, Issuing visa to students, tourists, entrepreneurs, military personnel</td>
<td>Negative and non-receptive: crackdown on Iranians, expulsion of diplomats &amp; military trainees, tight restrictions on visas, revoking visas, Prejudice, discrimination, racial profiling, hate crimes, deportation, stereotyping, stigmatizing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reasons for Migration</strong></td>
<td>Education &amp; training</td>
<td>Political &amp; Religious freedom, family reunification, better social life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of Migration</strong></td>
<td>Free &amp; Voluntary</td>
<td>Forced, exile, refugee, Asylum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Immigrant Category</strong></td>
<td>Students, Professionals, Entrepreneurs, Tourists</td>
<td>Political activists, religious minorities, family members</td>
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Mohsen M. Mobasher, Associate Professor of Anthropology & Sociology at UHD
# Views of Americans About Iran and Iranian Immigrants

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<th>After 9/11</th>
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<tr>
<td>Unfavorable opinion toward Iran</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran is an enemy of the U.S.</td>
<td></td>
<td>60%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran is an unfriendly country</td>
<td></td>
<td>34%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive view of Iranians</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>20%</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iranian nuclear research is a major concern</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>85%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iranian nuclear is a major threat to the U.S.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>65%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran would provide nuclear weapons to terrorist</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>82%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. should have war plans for Iran</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>67%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Iranian immigrants create problems for the country</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>40% in 1985</strong></td>
<td><strong>60% in 1993</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Coping with the Stigma of Being Iranian: Identity, Politics, Identity Crisis, and the Emergence of New, Less Threatening “Persian” Identity:

- **Outcomes include social isolation and marginalization**
  - Denial of being Iranian
  - Development of pessimistic and cynical attitudes toward other Iranians.
  - Strong feelings of social and psychological detachment from American Society.

- **To manage their stigma and feelings of self-hatred, shame, inferiority, and insecurity, many young immigrants opted to alter of their physical appearance.**
  - Others altered their Iranian names or adopted second, Americanized versions of their names.
  - Repressed their cultural and national identity
Politics, Ethnic Identity Renewal, and the Iranian Community in Exile

- Political construction of anti-Islamic Persian national identity by opponents of the Iranian government coupled with the continued Islamic phobia of American society has had an impact on Iranians Muslims, and their community in exile in a number of non-practicing ways.

1. Sharp rise in the number of non-practicing Iranian Muslims and Iranian born Muslims who converted to Christianity.
2. 46% Surveyed indicated as non-religious and do not practice Islam.
3. 33% of Iranians in MIT’s survey self-identified as agnostic
4. 9% Atheist
5. 21% surveyed to be spiritual with no organized religious affiliation.
What Needs to be Done

- Shift from Iranian immigrants to Iranians in Diaspora
- Comparative research between Iranian communities across the globe
- Qualitative and quantitative research on 2nd generation Iranians
- Qualitative and quantitative research on the experience of Iranian women