Education and Emigration:
The case of the Iranian-American community

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Abstract
This paper explores the plausibility of a hypothesis that puts forth perceived educational opportunity as a significant pull factor influencing Iranians' decisions to immigrate to the United States. Drawing on various literatures, including research on educational policy in Iran, government policy papers, and figures from recent studies and census data, the authors establish a case for investigating the correlation between perceived educational opportunity (or lack thereof) and immigration. Empirical findings presented here from a preliminary survey of 101 Iranian-born individuals living in the U.S. suggest that such a correlation may indeed exist, thus providing compelling grounds for further research in this area. The paper expands on existing literature by extending prevailing accounts of unfavorable conditions in Iran as push factors for emigration, to include the draw of perceived educational opportunity, as a coexisting and influential pull factor for immigration to the U.S.

Introduction

Popular discourse about Iranian immigration to the United States focuses on the social and political freedoms associated with relocation. The prevailing literature on Iranian immigration explains why people leave Iran, but accounts remain limited to a unilateral force--namely, unfavorable conditions in Iran. Drawing on existing studies of Iranian educational policies and their consequences, we propose an extension to this thesis. We hypothesize that perceived educational opportunity is a significant attraction for Iranians in considering immigration to the U.S.

To establish a foundation for our research, we provide a background on Iran's sociopolitical climate after the 1978/1979 revolution and examine salient literature on Iran's higher education policy. Following this overview, we review recent U.S. census data and other relevant indicators that supply additional insight into the educational attributes of Iranian-born immigrants. We demonstrate that recent resolutions passed by the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution of Iran (SCCR) explicitly connect increasing emigration rates to education-related issues. Finally, we explore the bearing of perceived educational opportunity on Iranian immigration to the U.S. through a preliminary survey of 101 Iranian-born individuals living in the U.S. We regard the study as a step toward investigating the potential correlation between perceived educational opportunity (or lack thereof) and immigration.

Historical Background

The educational landscape of Iran has been significantly impacted by the emergence of the Islamic Republic. Radical shifts in the State's ideological framework have led to much change in the structure, content, and policies associated with education. These, in turn, have affected the demographics of education and corresponded with an observed increase in emigration from Iran. This section provides a brief description of the historical backdrop to these trends.

In 1979 the Iranian monarchy was toppled by a broad-based revolution. Groups that initially found common ground in their desire to overthrow the Shah contended for power after the Revolution (Keddie, 1981). In the hopes of a freer Iran, some academic and political expatriates returned from abroad at this time. However, in place of a monarchy, they found an even stronger ideological hegemony under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (Torbat, 2002). To maintain control of the country and eliminate prospective threats to the State's ideology, the new Regime suppressed rival factions. Khomeini launched a Cultural Revolution (*engelab-e farhangi*)--resonant with the Chinese Cultural Revolution almost two decades prior (Sobhe, 1982)--in an effort to consolidate the State's power. A salient feature of this process was a sweeping campaign to purge all perceived "non-Islamic" entities and oppositions out from influential positions.[1]

Iranian universities were a hotbed of political activity during this time. Perceiving these as a threat to the embryonic state, Khomeini condemned higher education institutions in Iran as being the seat of moral corruption, claiming that "our university students are Westoxicated[2]. . . Many of our professors are at the service of the West. They brainwash our youth" (Behdad, 1995, p. 193). In another speech, Khomeini declared that, "All of [Iran's] backwardness has been due to the failure of most university-educated intellectuals to acquire correct knowledge of Iranian Islamic society" (Khomeini, 1981, p. 291). The Regime closed all institutions of higher education[3] in April 1980, only to reopen them three years later, after being "purified" and "Islamicized" (Sobhe, 1982).

The Cultural Revolution may be characterized as a threefold process: purification, preservation, and (re)production. Initially, universities, public sector posts, and other positions of influence were purged of all anti-regime personnel; this included rival parties, dissident factions, and some minority ethnic and religious groups (Keddie, 1981; Sanasarian, 2000). Preservation and production followed. Posts made vacant by the purge were filled with state supporters, to produce a monolithic and ultimately hegemonic state ideology. Many of those selected for high ranking positions in the public sector and academia neither had the required qualifications nor skills associated with their new posts.

Impact of Educational Policy on Iranians and Immigration

The Cultural Revolution in Iran has had a significant impact on the educational and professional landscape of post-revolutionary Iran. Policies and practices used to implement the goals of the Cultural Revolution have been associated with discriminatory treatment of various sectors of Iranian society, decreased educational quality and access, and staggering rates of emigration. Drawing on the works of Nader Habibi (1989), Keiko Sakurai (2004), and Akbar Torbat (2002), this section explores the relationship between aspects of educational policy in Iran and emigration, by focusing on various practices undertaken after the Revolution for the allocation of educational and professional opportunities.

In "Allocation of educational and occupational opportunities in the Islamic Republic of Iran," Nader Habibi (1989) illustrates how admittance into higher education has been based on ideological grounds, rather than on merit. Political screening, as defined by Habibi, is the use of administrative means to control access to higher education and public sector jobs, which are viewed among the eminent vehicles for social mobility in Iran. He suggests that the practice of screening applicants has served, more or less, as a discriminatory carrot-and-stick policy that has punished those who have been labeled as incongruent with the State's ideology, and rewarded those who have supported it. In turn, this has led to a depreciation of the university credential and the usefulness of higher education in the private and public employment sector.

While Habibi discusses the general policies of screening and purging in Iranian higher education, Keiko Sakurai (2004) looks more specifically at the role of the university entrance exam, the *Konkur*, as an apparatus in admitting state supporters and excluding groups that are not aligned with it. She also discusses the institutionalization of quotas favoring supporters who are predominantly poor, religiously conservative, and rural-dwelling. Thus, while such quotas are initiated under the auspices of social justice and equalization, Sakurai contends that the underlying reason for such policies is politically motivated, to the State's advantage. Sakurai makes two salient points: first, that policies of admission have increasingly marginalized qualified urban and minority populations, while integrating and assimilating conservative and rural populations within the State's ideological construct; and, second, that imbalanced preference for "social justice" has led to deteriorating educational quality.

Habibi and Sakurai's findings suggest that the Iranian regime has created an environment that both assimilates and isolates different segments of its citizenry. For those who choose to align themselves with the State's ideology, entrance into the universities may be understood as a measure of integration into the ideological construct of an Islamic Republic.[4] The result of such a policy has been the marginalization of a large sector of the Iranian population, effectively preventing its integration into a post-revolutionary Iran. The Regime's screening and purging policies have led to a measure of isolation from the State, and in extreme cases, emigration to another.

No less disconcerting to observers has been the associated brain drain that has accompanied disenchantment with the State policies of screening and purging, as well as declining educational opportunity in Iran. Akbar Torbat (2002) demonstrates how educational policies in Iran propel emigration from Iran to the U.S. in particular. He suggests that political pressures in

Iran and political freedoms in the U.S.--followed by economic, social, and professional considerations--motivate Iranian emigration.

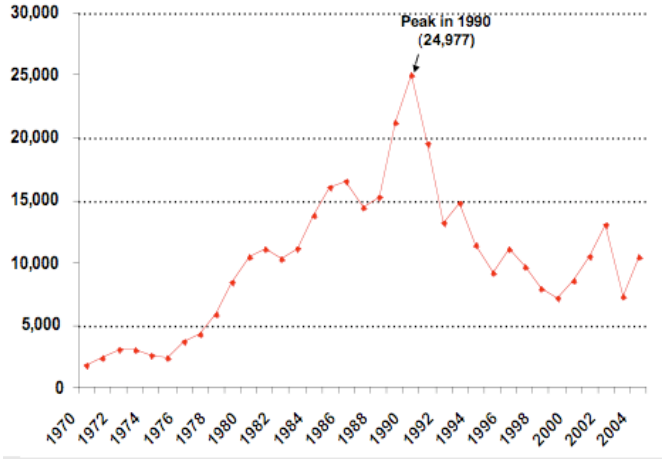
Torbat (2002) contends that discriminatory policies, diminished quality, insufficient resources and capacity, and increased demand for higher education have led to an amplified rate of brain drain (for both professionals and academics, and potential professionals and academics). Like Habibi (1989) and Sakurai (2004), Torbat notes the detrimental effect of mediocre instruction and quality on Iran's social and economic development. However, Torbat maintains that political factors are the greatest barrier to a "reverse brain drain" (2002, p. 294-295).

Taken together, the arguments made by Habibi (1989), Sakuari (2004), and Torbat (2002) suggest that both policy and quality issues associated with Iranian higher education have incited at least some Iranians (between 1.5 and 3 million) to leave Iran. The authors make a case that social and political restrictions are felt most in the space of education. Habibi's discussion of political screening illustrates a process of marginalization for many Iranians, as well as the depreciation of educational credentials. Torbat illustrates both lost opportunity (qualified students not being admitted) and opportunity cost (resources that could have been spent on more qualified students and faculty members) to students and the State, due to screening and purging practices. He explains how marginalized Iranians seek other outlets to meet their needs by immigrating to areas (such as the U.S.), where perceived opportunity and private benefit may be found. Torbat shows that the intersection of limited capacity and high demand for higher education confounds prospective students and graduates, causing disenchantment with prospects of higher education in Iran. While concurring with Habibi and Torbat about the negative effects of the admission process, Sakurai's discussion of the State's policies to equalize opportunity, even if only quantitatively, illustrates a phenomenon of integrating and assimilating many Iranians to become loyal citizens of the Islamic Republic. All three authors see the trajectory of Iran's economic and social development as subject to deterioration if these practices are maintained, and the brain drain of both current and potential human resources continues. The findings of these authors provide sufficient cause to further explore the relationship between perceived educational opportunity and emigration.

Emigration Trends and Policy Interventions by the SCCR

Due in part to the deteriorating quality, limited access, and restrictive policies related to higher education, emigration from Iran drastically increased in the years following the Revolution (Hakimzadeh & Dixon, 2006). In the U.S. alone, annual immigration rates peaked at nearly 25,000 for Iranians (see Figure 1). While Iranian immigration to the U.S. is not a new phenomenon (Abdollahi, 1979; Menashri, 1992), emigration rates steadily increased after the formation of the Islamic Republic (Torbat, 2002). According to the *U.S. Census 2000*, 283,225 Iranian-born immigrants were living in the U.S. by the year 2000 (the majority of which were in California) (2002).[5]

Figure 1: Iranian-Born Immigrants Admitted to the United States, 1970 to 2004

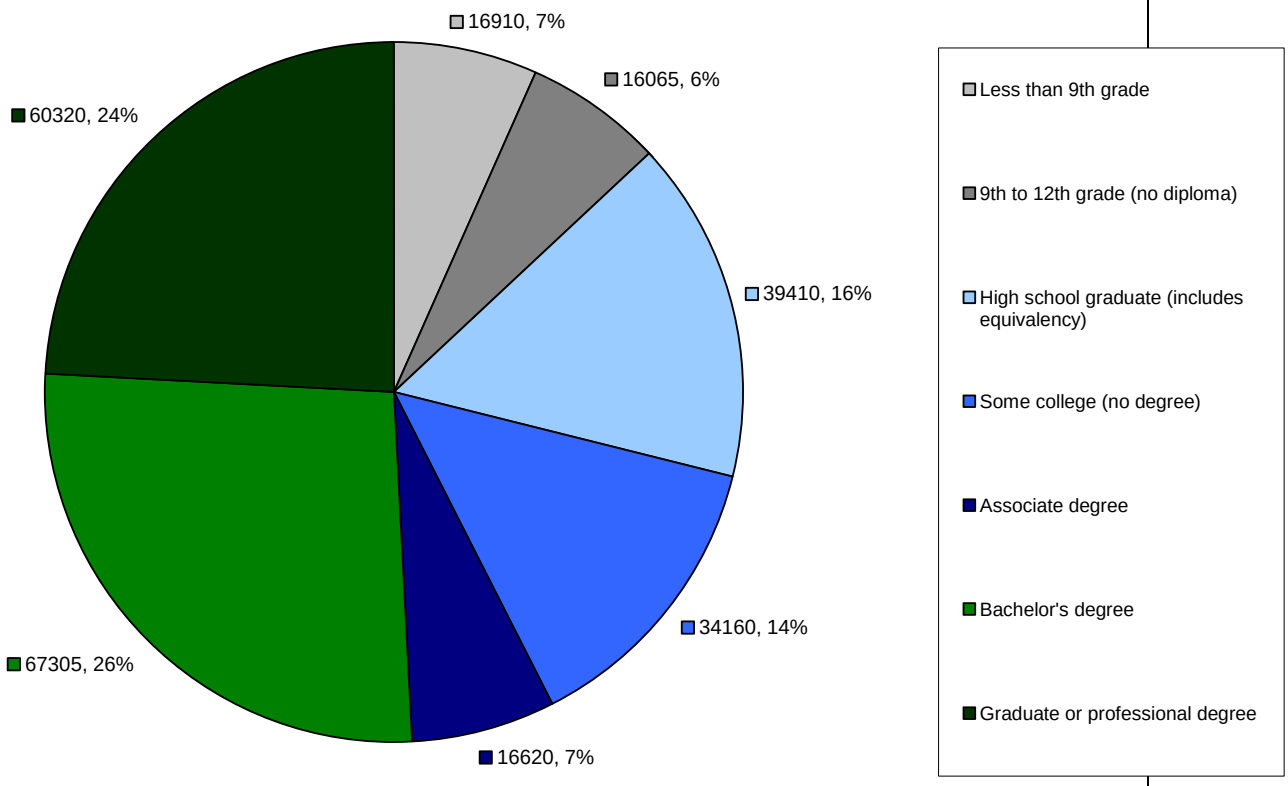


Islamic Republic of Iran (c 1979 -)

Note: The 1990 peak is due in part to people who arrived in the 1980s but did not adjust their status until the early 1990s.

Source: *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, 1970-2004*, U.S. Department of Homeland Security Office of Immigration Statistics (as cited in Hakimzadeh & Dixon, 2006).

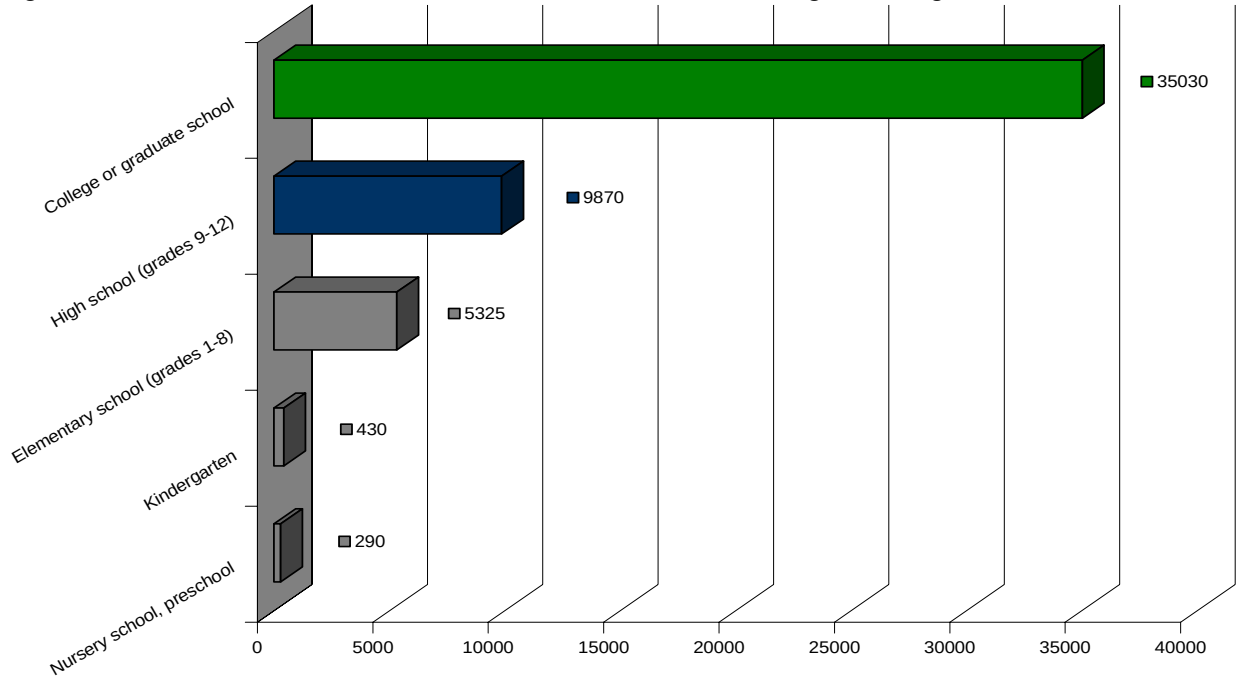
Figure 2: Educational Attainment of Iranian-Born American Immigrants



Source: U.S. Census 2000 (2002).

A large percentage of Iranian-born American immigrants are educated and education-bound (see Figures 2 and 3). Over 50,000 are enrolled in schools, 68.8% of which are university students (U.S. Census, 2002). Approximately 51% of the recorded population hold a Bachelors degree or higher, and nearly 87% have a high school diploma or higher. In an independent survey of 3,849 Iranian-Americans, conducted by the Iranian Studies Group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), 48% responded that education was the single most important factor in deciding to where to live in the U.S. (Iranian Studies Group, 2005).

Figure 3: School Enrollment of Iranian-Born American Immigrants, Age 3 and Over



Source: U.S. Census 2000 (2002).

Such demographic data suggests that a relationship between Iranian immigration to the U.S. and a perception of educational opportunity may indeed exist, and is worthy of empirical investigation. In addition, a series of resolutions passed by Iran's Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution (SCCR) in the past three years indicates that education is central to emigration concerns in Iran. In June 2003, the Council approved a resolution aimed at crafting policies and strategies to decrease the rate of emigration, particularly among Iranian elites and specialists (SCCR, 2006). Table 1 below provides a summary of the Resolution.

Table 1: SCCR--Policies and Strategies for Reducing the Rate of Elite Immigration

1- Organizing methods of absorption & employment of these people in the higher education system of the country.
1-2- Providing elites with special facilities.
1-3- Giving more information to elites about research & scientific capacities & capabilities of the country.
1-4- Expanding the capacity of M.A. & Ph.D. courses & increasing the level of education at these courses on the basis of developmental needs of the country.

1-5- Consolidating social & emotional ties & interests of elites with religions & national interests. 1-6- Making efforts to preserve social status of elites & specialists & institutionalizing production of thought as a public value. 1-7- Deepening religious believes [sic] & thoughts among elites & specialists. 1-8- Strengthening interaction & communication between researchers & scientific associations. 1-9- Preparing facilities & regulations in the field of enterpruneship [sic] for specialists.
2- Devising policies of [sic] returning elites & specialists to the country. 2-1- Paying attention to the social status of elites & specialists, informing them about needs & scientific facilities of the country & inviting them to return to the country. 2-2- Collecting qualitative & qualitative statistics about expatriate Iranian specialists. 2-3- Collecting research programs, specialized needs & the employment capacities of industrial & scientific centers of governmental & private sectors. 2-4- Holding regional scientific [sic] between scientists & officials to get access to real ways of returning elites to the country. 2-5- Granting credits & facilities to the centers that can pave the grounds for absorption of expatriate Iranian elites & specialists by making use of their programs & facilities.
3- Policies for making use of specialized ability of expatriate Iranian elites & specialists. 3-1- Collecting documented statistics & figures about the number of elites & specialists & their abilities in different fields of science. 3-2- Identifying essential & vital needs of scientific, academic & industrial centers of the country. 3-3- Signing contracts with elites & specialists for educational objectives, executing projects, & scientific support of research plans. 3-4- Making use of capabilities of immigrant elites (remotely) by means of modern information technology & utilizing electronic & computer environment as the complement of universities of the country.
4- Relevant organizations & the issue of preparing instructions. 4-1- Ministry of Science, Research & Technology and Ministry of Health & Medical Education are required to prepare & notify by-laws, executive instructions of abovementioned policies & strategies within six months after notification of this resolution. 4-2- Following organizations & institutions are required to cooperate with the above mentioned ministries regarding the specified articles. 4-2-1 The Ministry of Education regarding articles 1-6 & 2-1. 4-2-2 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs & the Organizations of Islamic Communication & Culture regarding articles 2-2 & 3-1. 4-2-3 The Organizations of Management & Planning regarding articles 1-1, 2-2, 1-6 & 2-5. 4-2-4 The IRIB regarding articles 1-3 & 1-6. 4-2-5 The Institution of the Supreme Leader's Representation at Universities regarding articles 1-5 & 1-7. 4-2-6 The Council of Scientific Research in the Country regarding article 1-4. 4-2-7 The Council of Employment regarding article 1-9. 4-3 The Supervision & Inspection Board is required to follow up & supervise the execution of these policies & strategies & submit a report to the SCCR.

Source: SCCR (2006).

The SCCR Resolution targets education-related issues to decrease brain drain. These intervention strategies include improving educational facilities (points 1-2 and 1-7), increasing the capacity of graduate level courses (point 4), promoting the status of university educators (points 1-6 and 1-7), and assessing the needs of academicians (points 3-2 and 3-4). Other points focus on expatriate "elites" (i.e. academics and professionals), soliciting their return to Iran for the purpose of providing services to the country. Furthermore, in January 2006, President Ahmadinejad and his Cabinet's national budget allocated an additional 50% in resources towards education. This figure is unlikely to be met according to the Economist Intelligence Unit's (2006) *Country Report: Iran at a Glance 2006-2007*, but it is certainly a symbolic gesture of the importance being placed on educational expansion and reform.

Empirical Research: Educational Opportunity and Iranian Emigration

While the existing literature highlights the social and political contexts of Iranian emigration, as well as the phenomenon of brain drain from Iran after the 1978/1979 revolution, empirical data devoted to explaining Iranian emigration in relation to perceived educational opportunity abroad remains absent. As we have shown, recent U.S. census data reveals high levels of educational achievement among the Iranian-American community, yet there has been no scholarship to investigate educational opportunity as a motivating factor for Iranian immigration to the U.S. The following study was designed to evaluate the hypothesis that perceived educational opportunity is a significant pull factor for Iranians immigrating to the U.S., alongside coexisting social, political, and religious push factors for emigration. The findings provide evidence to support further research into this area.

Research design

The survey was designed to investigate opinions of Iranian-Americans regarding education in Iran and the U.S. and reasons for emigration from Iran to the U.S. Our intent was to see if the data would: (a) uphold existing accounts of Iranian migration to the U.S., and (b) shed new light on the relationship between Iranian migration and educational opportunity in the U.S.

The survey consisted of 47 closed-ended questions and an opportunity to elaborate through an open-ended "comments" section. The survey comprised five general question categories: (1) demographic background, (2) reasons for emigration, (3) views on education in Iran, (4) views on education in the U.S., and (5) additional comments or feedback. Our demographics questions were designed to corroborate our sample as representative of the existing profile of the Iranian community in the U.S. (according to U.S. census data). Questions relating to emigration were designed with the intent of testing existing accounts of Iranian emigration, as well as our own assumption that educational opportunity plays an instrumental role in Iranian emigration to the U.S. Finally, our questions regarding views on education in Iran and in the U.S. address Iranian-American perceptions of educational quality, access, and opportunity in Iran and in the U.S. for comparative and correlative purposes.

Sampling

In order to obtain a broad and diverse sample, the survey was posted online at Irandokht.com and Persianmirror.com--two prominent websites devoted to news, culture, and arts in the Iranian-American community.[6] To achieve gender parity in the sample, Irandokht.com was selected because it is primarily geared toward a female Iranian-American audience. Both sites state that there are 2.2 to 3 million Iranians residing outside of Iran. They cater primarily (but not exclusively) to this group, particularly those in the U.S. In addition to posting the survey to these websites, a research assistant disseminated the survey to individuals with links to the Iranian community in Southern California. These, in turn, forwarded the survey link to other individuals and groups (unknown to the authors). Participants were able to access the survey online from August 18, 2006 until September 4, 2006. Survey collection was completed once a sample size of N=101 was achieved.

A total of 70.7% of respondents were born in Iran, and the median year of arrival to the U.S. was 1978. The median age of respondents upon arrival to the U.S. was 19 years. Table 2 presents a basic demographic profile of survey respondents, including religious affiliation and household income.

Table 2: Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents

General Descriptive Statistics	
Respondents born in Iran (%)	70.9
Median age upon arrival in U.S.	19
Median year of arrival in U.S.	1978
Female : male ratio (unspecified)	40:51 (10)

Religious Affiliation		
Religious affiliation	*Percent*	*Total*
Muslim	41.1%	37
Jewish	6.7%	6
Christian	3.3%	3
Bahai	11.1%	10
Zoroastrian	4.4%	4
No religious affiliation	24.4%	22
Atheist/ agnostic	4.4%	4
Other (please specify)	4.4%	4
Number of respondents		*90*
Number who did not respond to question		*11*

Household Income		
Income	*Percent*	*Total*
$0-9,999	11.1%	10
$10,000-14,999	1.1%	1
$15,000-24,999	5.6%	5
$25,000-34,999	6.7%	6
$35,000-49,999	16.7%	15
$50,000-74999	13.3%	12
$75,000-99,999	8.9%	8
$100,000-149,999	18.9%	17
$150,000-199,999	5.6%	5
$200,000 or more	12.2%	11
Number of respondents		*90*
Number who did not respond to question		*11*

Source: Authors' Data

Findings

This section presents a primarily descriptive narrative of our preliminary findings. These are organized and discussed under three major areas. The first is derived from survey questions that test existing accounts of Iranian emigration, namely sociopolitical push factors. The second emerges from survey questions that explore the possibility of alternate accounts of emigration, namely educational pull factors. Finally, the third area emerges from questions that examine the permanence of Iranian emigration.

(1) Religious and political persecution and lack of social freedoms are reasons for emigration from Iran. Pursuit of educational opportunities is a reason for immigration to the U.S.

Analysis of our data upholds existing accounts regarding the social and political aspects of Iranian emigration among our sample. Respondents identified the lack of social freedom, as well as religious and political persecution, as reasons for emigration. Respondents were allowed to cite more than one reason for emigration from Iran. However, lack of social freedoms was the most commonly cited push factor, of the three.

Of the sub-sample of respondents born in Iran (N=65), 12% said they emigrated for reasons of religious persecution. Political dissent, political persecution, or harm that may have befallen respondents or their families as a result of their political views were cited by 15% of respondents as reasons for emigration. Additionally, 46% of respondents attributed a lack of social freedoms (e.g. freedom of speech, women's rights, etc.) as a cause for emigration.

The pursuit of educational opportunities was the most frequently cited reason for immigration to the U.S. This response outnumbered the aggregate of social, political, and religious push factors for emigration. Table 3 highlights some of these findings.

Table 3: Reasons for Emigration

Reasons for Emigrating from Iran	*Response Percent*
Religious persecution in Iran	12.0%
Political persecution in Iran	15.0%
Lack of social freedoms in Iran	46.0%
Aggregate of social, political, religious reasons	73.0%
Pursuit of educational opportunities abroad	87.5%

Ranking of Reasons for Leaving Iran

	Most Important	Very Important	Important	Somewhat Important	Not important	N/A	Response Average
Religious reasons	10% (6)	12% (7)	10% (6)	5% (3)	**33% (19)**	29% (17)	**3.54**
Family reasons (moving closer to family in the U.S.)	7% (4)	4% (2)	13% (7)	13% (7)	24% (13)	**39% (21)**	**3.70**
Political reasons	12% (7)	11% (6)	19% (11)	21% (12)	14% (8)	**23% (13)**	**3.18**
Economic reasons	9% (5)	9% (5)	**28% (16)**	9% (5)	26% (15)	21% (12)	**3.43**
Reasons of social freedom	**36% (21)**	12% (7)	17% (10)	10% (6)	5% (3)	19% (11)	**2.21**
Educational reasons (for yourself or for members of your family)	**57% (36)**	19% (12)	11% (7)	3% (2)	6% (4)	3% (2)	**1.79**
						Total Respondents	**63**
						(skipped this question)	**38**

Source: Authors' Data.

(2) An overwhelming majority of Iranians who immigrated to the U.S. left Iran in pursuit of educational opportunities for themselves or for their family members.

Data from our sample suggests that, while the lack of social, political, and religious freedoms in Iran are major contributing push factors for Iranian emigration, educational opportunity is at least an equally important pull factor to the U.S. Of the sub-sample of respondents born in Iran (N=65), 87.5% indicated that they emigrated from Iran to the U.S. in search of educational opportunities for themselves or their family members. Moreover, 57% of this sub-sample stated that the pursuit of educational opportunities was the single most important reason for leaving Iran. Of the respondents who stated that they left Iran to pursue educational opportunities (N=56), 82% stated that they believed there to be more educational opportunities in the U.S. than in Iran. Also, of this sub-sample, 72.4% stated that they believed the quality of higher education in the U.S. to be greater than that of Iran. This is not to suggest that respondents necessarily held negative views of higher education in Iran; 40.6% stated that they did not know about the quality of education in Iran, and 31% believed higher education in Iran to be "good" or "excellent."

Respondents also reported lack of access to higher education as a problem for Iranian secondary school graduates--43.8% of respondents believe that there is not sufficient access to higher education opportunities in Iran. Moreover, 85.5% of respondents believe that ideological affinity with the Regime plays a "very important" or "somewhat important" role in the hiring of faculty and the admission of students in Iranian higher education. These preliminary findings suggest a correlation between sociopolitical conditions in Iran and a desire to seek educational opportunities abroad. Furthermore, the findings suggest that educational issues may act as *both* push factors for emigration, in terms of perceived lack of access or quality in Iran, *and* as pull factors for immigration, in terms of perceived access and quality in the U.S.

(3) A majority of the Iranian-Americans sampled would be willing to consider relocating or "moving back" to Iran if they perceived a positive and lasting change (political, social, economic, etc.) in Iran in the foreseeable future.

Scholarship on the post-revolutionary Iranian Diaspora focuses primarily on the unfavorable conditions that specific populations of the Iranian community faced in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution. Political and religious persecution is among the most notable, particularly among secular nationalists, various Marxist factions, monarchists, as well as religious minorities, such as the Baha'is and Jews. Restrictions on social freedoms are another commonly cited reason for emigration. Given the role that sociopolitical change played in fostering emigration from Iran after the Revolution, we thought it significant to investigate whether attitudes toward living in Iran would shift if "positive" change were to occur in Iran. To investigate the permanence of emigration, we asked respondents whether they would return to Iran if they perceived "positive" lasting sociopolitical changes in Iran.

When asked, "*If you perceived a positive and lasting change (political, social, economic, etc.) in the foreseeable future in Iran, would you consider living in (or returning to) Iran?*," 71.4% of respondents (N=84) affirmed that they would. The question was deliberately worded to present sociopolitical change in Iran in the most general and vague terms possible, so as to avoid suggesting a bias or preference for a particular sociopolitical outcome (i.e. externally-led regime change, internal reform, revolution, etc.). The findings suggest that, while education is an attractive reason to immigrate to the U.S., it is not necessarily a reason to remain permanently.

This finding may serve to challenge existing accounts of schools as sites of social integration and/or agents of assimilation for immigrants. Though Iranians are likely to be highly educated and affluent in the U.S., a majority of our sample indicated a willingness to consider relocating to Iran under desirable conditions. This shallow footing in the U.S. may be due in part to the sociopolitical conditions under which a large part of Iranian immigration to the U.S. occurred--while 48.4% of respondents viewed themselves as immigrants when they arrived in the U.S., 46.8% regarded themselves as a temporary resident/visitor (coming to the U.S. for a short period of time with definite intentions to return to Iran). We regard this finding as a potential starting point for further inquiry into how Iranian-Americans and possibly other immigrant groups construct and sustain "immigrant" identities in the U.S.

Limitations

The difficulties of conducting an exploratory study do much to dampen overly enthusiastic prognostications. We encountered numerous difficulties that must be addressed to properly contextualize our findings and set the stage for more rigorous future inquiries. First, our dissemination of the survey was entirely electronic. The disadvantages of collecting data from online surveys include sampling bias by excluding those who do not have access to, or knowledge of, computers or the internet, as well as bias from posting the survey onto two websites. It is our hope that the large readership and popularity of the selected websites may serve to mitigate some measure of this bias.

While we acknowledge that the study's findings cannot be generalized to the entire Iranian-American population, we nevertheless believe the participants in our survey represent the views of the college educated (i.e. majority) of this population. According to recent U.S. census data (2002), 51% of the Iranian population in the U.S. holds a Bachelors degree, while another 34,000 (from a total of 283,225) are currently enrolled at university. We expect findings from this exploratory study to fall in line with this population. The electronic format of the survey, by excluding participants who do not use or own a computer, necessarily reduces our ability to generalize the findings more broadly. However, this does not negatively impact the significance of the findings. Despite a lack of empirical research on computer usage in the Iranian-American community, we assume computer usage in this population to be quite high, as evidenced by the existence and high readership of numerous Iranian-American websites, between 70,000 to 100,000 Persian language blogs, and Persian's status as one of the web's most commonly used languages (Naughton, 2006).

An additional limitation to the study relates to the exclusive reliance on data collected from one instrument, rather than a variety of instruments, such as interviews and focus groups. The strategy of conducting an online survey served to facilitate the collection of data in a community that is widely dispersed, with the exception of a large population of Iranian-Americans in Southern California. Perhaps the greatest challenge in conducting the research was the large rate of attrition in our survey--many participants declined to answer certain questions and the publisher/editor of a well-known Iranian-American website refused to post the survey on the site for fear that "the survey would be too invasive." The difficulties of conducting social research in the Iranian-American community have been noted in previous research (Shirazi & Nazemian, 2004), but have not been adequately explored. Finally, we may have inadvertently overlooked other important considerations and consequently left ourselves open to criticism. It is our hope that this exploratory study both contributes to wider debates on immigration and education and also leads to deeper inquiry into a well-known but little understood immigrant community in the U.S.

Conclusion

Policies stemming from the Cultural Revolution have had a great impact on the course of post-revolutionary Iran's educational system. Due to an array of discriminatory and restrictive policies that, in theory, have served to Islamicize Iranian universities and secure the influence of Regime supporters, Iran has witnessed a steady decline in educational quality and a related increase in brain drain. Authors cited in this article (Habibi, 1989; Sakurai, 2004; Sobhe, 1982; Torbat, 2002) point to the severe ramifications of state education policies on the present and

future economic, social, and political development of Iran. Moreover, the authors cited here also illustrate the marginalization of many Iranians, while integrating and assimilating others. Despite extensive analysis of admittance capacity, the frustration of non-admitted prospective students, declining numbers of competent faculty and administrators, and increasing rates of brain drain, none of the aforementioned authors have conducted an empirical investigation of educational opportunity as an attractive factor for Iranian immigration to the U.S.

However, this does not imply that the current body of research does not support this thesis. Indeed, we build our conjecture on both the qualitative and quantitative studies in the field, hypothesizing that Iranian immigration to the U.S. is influenced by perceived educational opportunity in the U.S. and limits of opportunity in Iran. Our preliminary findings indicate that while discriminatory policies of the Iranian regime and the lack of sociopolitical freedoms are among the integral reasons behind Iranian emigration, combining them with the study of perceived educational opportunities abroad is both worthwhile and promising. Situating Iranian emigration in the context of educational opportunity yields empirical data that deepens existing accounts of why millions of Iranians have left Iran over the course of the past three decades. While lack of political, social, and religious freedoms have been, and continue to be, compelling reasons for leaving Iran, the current study suggests that educational opportunity plays an important and oft-overlooked role in why Iranians immigrate to the U.S.

It remains unclear whether educational opportunity has served as an end to, or as a means for, immigration to the U.S. It is reasonable to consider that educational opportunity may not only serve as a reason to immigrate, but also as an exit strategy from undesirable sociopolitical conditions through the acquisition of student visas. However, student visas, as non-immigrant documents, do not fall under the umbrella of immigration per se. Furthermore, between 2000 and 2005, student visas accounted for only 20% of non-immigrant visas issued to Iranians (Hakimzadeh & Dixon, 2006). Thus, if educational opportunity is indeed a mechanism for leaving, such an argument can only be applied, at best, to a small subset of non-immigrant student visa recipients.[7] Such distinctions, however, fall outside the scope of the current study and require further investigation.

The preliminary findings presented here shed light on educational opportunity as a pull factor influencing immigration decisions, alongside sociopolitical push factors. The majority of participants believe that there is limited access to higher education in Iran and cite educational opportunity abroad as the most common reason for leaving Iran for the U.S. On a broader level, this may suggest that U.S. immigration policy is shifting toward increasingly recruiting immigrants with higher levels of education in order to control the composition of immigration. However, in the case of the Iranian-American community, we found that immigrants, while accomplished and successful in their adopted home, maintain a strong sense of connection to Iran, despite estrangement from the incumbent regime and more than a quarter of a century of hostilities between the governments of the U.S. and Iran. This hints that while education is an attractive reason to immigrate to the U.S., it is not necessarily a reason to remain permanently.

Notes

1 Targeted groups included the Tudeh Communist Party, the Marxist oriented Fedaian-e Khalq (Fedaian Party), the social-democratic Jebhe Melli (National Front), and rival Islamic groups like the Mojahedin-e Khalq (Mojahedin Party) (Habibi, 1989).

2 The term Westoxicated or Weststruckness (*gharbzadeh/ gharbzadegi*) comes from Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1982).

3 It should be noted that university faculty and students played a significant role in the Revolution, despite non-congruence with Khomeini's agenda. Consequently, universities became centers of political activism, organization, and protest (Keddie, 1981; Sobhe, 1982).

4 It is important to note that alignment with State ideology, in some cases, is superficial, in order to access State services; however, symbolic submission to State ideology still plays a role in maintaining the *façade* of a monolithic State ideology.

5 While U.S. census data estimates the Iranian-American community at 330,000 members, the Iranian Interest Section in Washington D.C. reports passport records for approximately 900,000 Iranians in the U.S. For details on the underreporting of Iranian-Americans, see Fata and Rafii (2003).

6 Persian Mirror (www.persianmirror.com) is headquartered in New York (NY) and receives over 3 million hits per month. IranDokht (www.irandokht.com) is headquartered in Los Angeles (CA) and receives over 4 million hits per month.

7 Hakimzadeh and Dixon (2006) summarize data from the U.S. Department of State on visas issued to Iranians as follows: "…during 2005, 5,314 immigrant visas were issued to Iranians. The majority (2,900) of immigrant visas for Iranians were granted through immediate relative petitions. Another 1,808 visas were granted based on family preference, and the remainder included diversity immigrants, employment preference, and returning residents and armed forces special immigrants, respectively. In the last five years, the most commonly issued non-immigrant visas for Iranian nationals have been the student, temporary worker, and foreign government representative visas. 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)."

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