

**THE IRANIAN EXODUS: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE IRANIAN
EXPERIENCE OF IMMIGRATING TO THE UNITED STATES**

Ava Karami
University of Washington, Bothell
Summer 2021

Completed in fulfillment of the degree requirements for Master of Arts in Policy Studies under
the instruction of Charles Collins, Ph.D.

Second Reader: Keith Nitta, Ph.D

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my lovely parents, particularly my mother, of whom I would not be here today finishing my Master's degree. She has been a beacon of light throughout my writing process, and I am filled with the utmost gratitude for helping me fund my education. To the Iranian community, of which they hail—I hope to contribute valuable knowledge that my community can build upon. Thank you to my interview participants, of which none of this would be possible and for providing their valuable perspective. I wish them well in their journey to becoming a United States citizen. I would also like to thank my advisor Dr. Charlie Collins, a source of invaluable advice as I navigated my capstone process. To Dr. Keith Nitta, my second reader and an incredibly helpful guiding figure throughout this entire process. To Dr. Nader Nazemi, a supportive and resourceful guide throughout my capstone process. Lastly, I would like to thank Tanya Fekri, of whom she has extended herself as a resource many times.

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to examine the experiences of twelve Iranians immigrating to the United States and the discriminatory governmental initiatives and policies instituted on Middle Easterners, more specifically Iranian-Americans, after the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001 in the United States. Additionally, this study will provide a comprehensive policy history through Presidential Administrations beginning from the George W. Bush Administration to the Donald J. Trump Administration to provide background to Iranian immigration experiences. Utilizing a qualitative research design, data is gathered from twelve one-on-one interviews conducted over the online video platform Zoom, which culminated in the answer to the research question tested, “How have Iranian immigrants experienced U.S. immigration policies since 9/11?” Qualitative thematic analysis results indicate Iranians face a multitude of barriers in their visa application process to the United States due to the volatile relationship between Iran and the United States, including a lengthy citizenship process, difficulties travelling within and outside the country, and discrimination within the United States.

SECTION I: INTRODUCTION

In January of 2020, more than 60 Iranians were questioned as they crossed the border from Canada to the United States after the death of General Qassem Soleimani by American armed forces. Detained for upwards of eight hours, these Iranian and American dual citizens were questioned about their political affiliations, family information, and whether or not the individual served in the military while in Iran. Throughout the modern history of Iranian-American state relations, Iranian-born US citizens have been subject to more scrutiny by the United States government on the basis of their nationality (Read and Parvini, 2020). Although this event sparked outrage in the Iranian community in America and abroad, it is important to highlight that this occurrence is not an isolated incident. Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 in New York, the United States has taken a hardline approach to immigration through blanket discriminatory federal policies as a means to curb future terrorist attacks from occurring (Alshabani, 2021). Although the population of Iranian immigrants are well established in America, they have remained one of the United States' most vulnerable populations (Ansari, 2006). Consistently caught in the crossfire between the two countries, ordinary Iranian-American dual citizens often pay the price when state relations sour. As a result, Iranian nationals, regardless of their immigration status, are excessively surveilled and have been detained by the federal government for extended periods of time for simply existing in the United States as a Middle Eastern immigrant (PAAIA, 2014).

According to the American Community Survey, the Iranian community in the United States roughly accounts for 463,552 people of Iranian heritage but the true number of Iranians is assumed to be twice as large (PAAIA, 2021). Beginning during the rise of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, the Iranian government's strict Shiite fundamentalist theocracy and their

intolerance of other practiced religions have caused an exodus of Iranian refugees to flee Iran and seek asylum in other countries. As Iranian-American tensions have continued to heighten in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the number of refugees and immigrants have continued to increase in the United States. As the United States contains the highest population of Iranian refugees and immigrants in the Western Hemisphere, the difficult and lengthy immigration processes are imperative to understand the difficulties the Iranian community faces while living in diaspora (Modarres, 1998).

Utilizing the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 as context, I address the Iranian diaspora through the impact of modern immigration policies that were created as means to prevent immigration from countries of state-sponsored terror and their impact on Iranians living in the United States. To address the pitfalls of the immigration system toward Iranians, this study examines the American immigration system through the eyes of twelve Iranian nationals of varying asylum-seeking and immigrant statuses about their process or completion of immigrating to the United States after 9/11. Providing researchers and scholars alike with additional literature on the Iranian community in diaspora and the Iranian assimilation process into American culture and society, the results of these interviews culminate in a retrospective research study that ultimately answers the question, “How have Iranian immigrants experienced U.S. immigration policies since 9/11?” Utilizing qualitative thematic analysis, their responses have been coded to find instances of similar experiences which will be used as a reference for creating policy recommendations to end the discriminatory policies and practices instilled in the American immigration system today.

SECTION II: BACKGROUND

This section describes the modern history of Iranian-American relations beginning from the latter half of the Qajar Dynasty to the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001. Below, I present information on the involvement of the British and American governments in the Iranian oil industry and the subsequent coup d'état that occurred after the Prime Minister attempted to nationalize the oil industry. I then discuss the Pahlavi Dynasty's Westernization efforts that were met with backlash from the Shiite clergymen, causing an insurrection against the government. I later finish with the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran and their involvement in the Iran-Iraq War, as well as the policy implications on Iranian-Americans after the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York during 9/11.

The Qajar Dynasty (1796-1925):

Modern Iranian history can be classified as an incredibly tumultuous period between Iran and Western powers, particularly the United States. During 1796-1925, the Qajar dynasty reigned over Iran (Keddie, 1983). Directly correlating with the high point of European and US imperial expansion, the Qajar dynasty was subject to continued attempts by the British monarchy to imperialise Iran (Yarshater, 2001). In 1903, William Knox D'Arcy founded the First Exploitation Company and the Bakhtiari Oil Company, in which the Iranian government was a stakeholder. According to Safavi (1951), these two oil companies were bought by the Anglo-Persian oil company in 1909 as the British government had begun to recognize the advantages of using oil over coal for the British Navy. Oil production began to increase exponentially until nearly thirty years later, when the Iranian government began to reconsider their agreement with the British

monarchy as they felt the “royalty, taxation, and other dues accruing to them should, under a new concession, be raised from something like £400,000 a year to £1,500,000” (Safavi, 1951, pg. 96).

The Anglo-Persian oil company continued to expand rapidly following World War II, subjecting the Iranian government and the Iranians working for the company to substandard working conditions. Simultaneously, other states began to recognize the benefit of utilizing oil instead of coal, as requests to the Iranian government for oil concessions from the USSR and the United States began to accumulate (Safavi, 1951). Concurrently, the disapproval of the Qajar dynasty began to grow, and the Iranian people began to look towards a new leader. Soldier and politician Reza Khan, in direct opposition to the Qajar dynasty, pushed for a centralized government to modernize and reform to instill a renewed sense of Iranian nationalism (Ghods, 1991). In 1921, he successfully installed himself as the leader of Iran and the first monarch of the Pahlavi dynasty by overthrowing the Qajar cabinet in a coup d’etat (Brysac, 2007).

Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh, with the aid of the Iranian Marxist Tudeh Party, began to deny and suspend oil concessions, signing two bills in December of 1944 that “(i) prohibiting the right of granting oil concessions to any foreign state or company, and (ii) nationalising the oil industry throughout Iran” (Safavi, 1951). The British government, with a large stake in the Anglo-Persian Oil Company and notorious for its pursuit of oil, convinced the President Eisenhower of the United States, to interfere with the Iranian government citing a need to prevent Soviet expansion in the region and become a stakeholder in the Iranian oil industry (Balaghi, 2013). With the aid of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the British and United States’ governments established Operation Ajax with the goal of toppling the Persian Qajar dynasty and Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh (Marsh, 2003). Proving successful, the

operation installed Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi into power as the next King of Iran, creating the opportunity for additional British and American involvement in Iranian affairs.

The Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1979):

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, stepped into the position of Shah and Westernized the country through aid from the United Kingdom and the United States, reforming the education and transportation systems while improving women's rights. This garnered many followers who admired the changes created for a more "free and just" society that believed the reforms were improvements to Iranian society and government (Chehabi, 1998). However, an undercurrent of adamant opposers began to grow, some of which included the Shia Fundamentalists who believed Iranian society should be guided under Islamic principles. As the wealth inequality became more prevalent throughout the Shah's rule, he began to flaunt his wealth while his citizens were facing economic hardships, and protests sprung throughout Iran against the Shah and his regime. To quell the increasing unrest among the population, the Shah utilized the Western powers and the SAVAK, or secret police, to disband the protests using violent methods (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 1991). The brutality of the Shah's methods coupled with a blatant disregard for the Iranian people, led to a rebellion from average Iranians looking for a change from a regime built on the exploitation of their people. Average Iranians, regardless of their sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds came en masse to protest against an oppressive regime (Benjamin, 2018). Among the protestors, the Islamic fundamentalist movement struck a chord among older and rural Iranians who believed Iran was straying too far from its principles and was not aligned with the book of Quran. The Iranian

rebellions against the government began to have a myopic focus on Islamicism, although many protestors were searching for a cause to rebel against an indecent government who brutalized its opposition.

As the Shah of Iran was removed from power following a regime that boasted its extravagance while neglecting and brutalizing its people, the possibility of removal from power and a subsequent power vacuum in Iran became inevitable. With no formal government structure to replace a monarchical system, Iran was at a loss attempting to find a cohesive power to take its place. As the Shah was ousted, the Islamic regime, with the most supporters, ideology, and central figurehead for the movement, was installed into power. Ayatollah Khomeini, an ardent Islamic fundamentalist, was the central figurehead for the Islamic movement, drumming up support from his loyalists in religious centres such as Qom (Rouleau, 1980). A thoroughly convincing man who had the support of a bigger minority of Iranians, Ayatollah Khomeini rose to power through peaceful means and appealed to his supporters who believed in the fundamentalist ideology. These ideologies, the antithesis to the Shah's Western mores and values, became ingrained into the Iranian political structure and later society, while establishing the beginnings of the current theocratic governmental structure that Iran holds today.

Since the Islamization of the state of Iran after the fall of the Shah's regime, Iran became an increasingly polarized state. Devout in its beliefs and imposition on others, Iran found both fervent supporters and dissenters who rejected all notions of a secular state. The Shia Fundamentalist ideology found in the Iranian government polarized the new form of government from Western countries. After the Iranian Revolution in 1979, a body of *faqihs* (Islamic jurists) were tasked with conforming Islam to the new Iranian Constitution (Nikzam, 1999). The inception of the government and their laws pushed the boundaries of what the Western forms of

government deemed to be acceptable in Western standards, raising alarm bells against the Iranian interpretation of Quran that allowed for the marginalization of women and minorities (Nikzam, 1999).

Towards the last year of the Iranian Revolution, Iranian-American relations began to heighten with the 1979 Iranian Hostage Crisis. During the latter half of 1979, 52 American diplomats and citizens working at an American embassy in Iran's capital of Tehran were seized and detained by Ayatollah Khomeini's militant supporters for 444 days (Jahanpour, 1992). The American government, seeking to release the hostages, applied sanctions that caused the hostage-takers to reexamine their need to hold them. To raise the side costs of holding hostages, the United States government "froze Iranian deposits in US banks, cut off the shipment of spare military parts to Iran, and terminated all crude oil imports from Iran" (Glad, 1989). Although initial attempts at diplomacy to resolve the Hostage Crisis were taken, this event became the catalyst for a hostile approach towards the Iranian government.

The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988):

The negative American perception of the Iranian government flourished after the Iranian Hostage, and continued onto the US backed war against Iran through the Iraqi militia from 1980-1988 when the Iraqi government sought to establish itself as a major player in the Middle East. President Saddam Hussein of Iraq, in efforts to "become the dominant power in the Persian Gulf, control the world's oil supplies, and destroy Israel," invaded Iran on 22 September, 1980 (Riedel, 2013). To prevent Iran from obtaining significant power in the Middle East, the United States sent the CIA to foil Iranian plans with crucial intelligence. The rift between the United

States' backing of Iraq and the cooperation of American allies caused the Iranian government to maintain little diplomacy with the United States. The Iranian government blamed the United States for "subjecting them to the conflict and orchestrating the global tilt towards Iraq," creating a deeply rooted anti-American sentiment and distrust of the West (Riedel, 2013). Towards the end of the Iran-Iraq war, Iran was left devastated as their cities were decimated and the economy in shambles.

As Iran has been discovered to hold 11.1% of the world's vast oil reserves, Iran has constantly needed to arm itself by utilizing nuclear weaponry against the increase of Western-backed methods of Iranian government removal through strategic allyship and partnership through resources (Burke, 2007). The relatively recent discovery of oil has engaged both the United States and Iran in proxy wars throughout the MENA region and has continued throughout the decades, leaving both countries in a race to remove each other's hegemonic power through probable utilization of nuclear weaponry. This fight for hegemony in MENA has bled into how the United States interprets foreign policy in the Middle East, strategically choosing key states such as Saudi Arabia and Israel as allies to combat its adversaries, particularly Iran.

SECTION III: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I lay the framework for this study by describing its position within the field of Iranian Studies and Iranian Diaspora Studies. I will then go on to describe the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, their consequential policies that were created as a result of the attacks, and the political implications they had for Iranian nationals living in the United States. Next, I will detail the concept of “terrorism” and its inherent impacts on immigration policy in the United States. Lastly, I will finish with how the persecution of religious minorities in Iran has forced the migration of refugees to seek asylum in the United States.

Iranian Studies:

This study grounds itself within the confines of Iranian studies, a broad field of academia that engages subdivision including language, literature, culture, art, history, and contemporary affairs of Iran (Bozorgmehr, 1998; Hourcade, 1987; Mahdi, 1998; Marandi and Tari, 2014; Modarres, 1998). In Marandi and Tari’s (2014) “Iranian Studies in the United States and Constructions of Post-Revolutionary Iran: A Case Study,” these scholars delve into the production of Iranian studies and the issues surrounding current Iranian studies as a form of reproduction of modern Orientalist studies. In addition, they address the biases that researchers have when forming perceptions of Iranian Studies, leading to “a distorted image of Iranian society which leads to greater misunderstandings and misinterpretations” (Marandi and Tari, 2014, pg. 47). Within this work, the authors address three major problems of the Iranian Studies in the United States. The first issue is the political affiliations of the researchers working in this field of academia, explaining that the majority of researchers that have come to the United States

were those associated with the Pahlavi dynasty that attempted to make sense of their experiences in exile. The second issue is with the disconnect of current researchers with Iranians living within their home country, as they have been removed from the country for 30 years. The third issue is with the reconstruction of Iranian literature through the eyes of Iranian exiles who are unsympathetic towards the events of the Iranian Revolution. Although this literature addresses the concept of Orientalism in earnest, the authors neglect to address the notion that Orientalism is not intended to be referenced to Iran, but instead applies to the literature surrounding Arab studies. Furthermore, their piece does not recognize the production of Iranian Diaspora studies as a legitimate subdivision of Iranian Studies, referencing the association with the Pahlavi dynasty as the sole reason as to why the Iranians may be fleeing, disregarding those in need of religious refuge.

Iranian studies has laid the framework for Iranian Diaspora studies, a subset of Iranian studies that provides context on the exodus of Iranians to countries such as the United States. However, this subset of Iranian Studies remains relatively dated. According to Bozorgmehr's "From Iranian Studies to Studies of Iranians in the United States" (1998), he highlights the emergence and growing importance of Iranian Diaspora studies by citing "After the [1979] Revolution, more Iranian students turned to humanities and social sciences to grapple with what had happened in their homeland" (Bozorgmehr, 1998, pg. 12). He also concludes that "there was very little published about Iranians in the U.S. before the Iranian Revolution" (Bozorgmehr, 1998, pg. 14). The timeline of the release dates of literature surrounding Iranians in the United States were close to non-existent before 1979, spiked before the 2000s, and has continued to plateau. Due to the release date of Bozorgmehr's study in 1998, it was not able to account for the restrictive policies put in place by the federal government and the boom in the Iranian

population of exiles due to young Iranians searching for more opportunities outside of Iran due to the sanctions placed on Iran by the American government. This study will encapsulate the modern history of Iran by addressing these points and providing valuable background to the recent history of Iranians in the 2000s and 2010s.

Fixated on the assimilation process, settlement patterns, and cultural identity of Iranians and second-generation Iranians in the United States, this study contributes to this field through interviews of Iranians currently in diaspora and the various ways their identity as an Iranian has shaped the difficulties they have endured while immigrating and assimilating in the United States. Using historical context of the contemporary affairs of the United States and Iran, I synthesize qualitative data taken from interviews to receive direct insight on the current immigration processes and ordeals an Iranian has to endure while in the United States. Given the dated history of the Iranian diaspora field, it is imperative that a study that addresses the modern experiences of an Iranian in diaspora is released.

9/11 and its Political Implications:

In this subsection, I provide a brief history on the terrorist group al-Qaeda and the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001. I also address the reconstruction of the Executive Offices of the government following the beginning of President George W. Bush's "War on Terror." Finally, I discuss the ensuing effects on both internal and foreign policy between MENA and the United States, particularly on Iranians living within the United States who were impacted by the formation of these policies.

Al-Qaeda, a network of extremists in Afghanistan that utilize the teachings of the Quran to justify the slaughter and overthrow of people and governments that did not adhere to their interpretation of the Islamic text. With the ultimate goal of creating a new world order based on their interpretation of the Quran, al-Qaeda targeted countries that challenged their notion of how a government should be run. On 11 September, 2001, four airplanes carrying civilians from the United States were hijacked by nineteen people tied to the terrorist group al-Qaeda. On what was later known as 9/11, two airplanes crashed into the upper floors at the World Trade Center in New York City, demolishing the complex and killing 2,753 people. The third plane crashed into the Pentagon, the United States' headquarters for their department of defense in Arlington, Virginia, killing 184 people. The fourth plane crashed into an empty field in Pennsylvania, killing all 40 passengers on board. In a heinous act of symbolism, al-Qaeda targeted the World Trade Center to attack the "centerpieces of globalization and America's economic power and prosperity," and the Pentagon as it was the representation of American militarism. With these meticulously planned attacks, al-Qaeda expected the events of 9/11 to become a step to creating their new world order by weakening America as a global power and promoting their interests across the Middle East and North Africa (9/11 Memorial and Museum).

Immediately following the events of 9/11, the United States took swift measures to protect their citizens by bolstering their security within its borders and internationally. Less than a month after the terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush worked to restructure the United States government by adding the Office of Homeland Security (OHS) to the Executive Office of the President, effectively beginning the "War on Terror." This office, as described in "Homeland Security Twenty Years After 9/11: Addressing Evolving Threats" by Swalwell and Alagood (2021), was created "to develop and coordinate the implementation of a comprehensive national

strategy to secure the United States from terrorist threats or attacks,” and provided a counterterrorism measure as well as developing legislative proposals (Swalwell and Alagood, 2021). In June of the following year, the Office of Homeland Security became the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) with the House of Representatives Homeland Security Act of 2002. The change in status from Office to Department granted the DHS the ability to have broad jurisdiction over a wide range of policy, but chose to focus solely on removing the threat of terrorism from abroad although the threat of domestic terrorism is perceived to be a far greater threat (Swalwell and Alagood, 2021). Within the broader coalition of the Department of Homeland Security, the DHS was organized into three subsections: the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the Bureau of Customs, and the Federal Protection Service (Flynn, 2015). Upon the Department of Homeland Security’s formation, the Department has prioritized “focusing on the areas where its mission and jurisdiction are clearest: enforcing immigration and securing borders” (Swalwell and Alagood, 2021). Swalwell and Alagood’s study provides an in-depth analysis as to the formation of the early Department of Homeland Security and its problematic beginnings that have continued to disrupt the immigration system greatly. Addressing the change from the Executive Office of Homeland Security to the Department of Homeland Security allows us to view the structural issues with the immigration system to eventually diminish their jurisdiction over policymaking, in which security is heavily emphasized.

The establishment of the US Department of Homeland Security and its subdivisions led to an immediate crackdown of immigrants coming to the United States from countries with a predominately Muslim population, including Iran. According to Guttentag’s “Immigrants' Rights in the Aftermath of 9/11: Detention, Discrimination and Secrecy” (2002), former President

George W. Bush released statements proclaiming that the United States was not engaging in a battle with Arabs, Muslims, or Middle Easterners but terrorists, the actions of the Department of Homeland Security gave a different indication. However, immediately after the attacks of 9/11, 1200 individuals with minor non-criminal immigrant violations including overstaying a visa, violating their student visa status, or working illegally and fit a Middle Eastern profile were arrested or detained (Guttentag, 2002). These individuals were found to have no correlation with the 9/11 attacks, and were reported to be subjected to harsh questioning and the possibility of deportation if they failed to comply with law enforcement. Seeing as the nineteen aeroplane hijackers came from various countries in the Middle East and North Africa, a rise of ethnic and religious profiling from the DHS of Middle Eastern immigrants attempting to enter the country or apply for visas became increasingly prevalent (Duvall and Marzec, 2011; Hing, 2006).

The impact of 9/11 severely impacted the Iranian-American community who were not involved in the attacks, but have faced serious implications due to their national origin, similar religious beliefs, and racial proximity to the Arab community. The Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act, or the USA PATRIOT Act, was among one of the most influential policies that severely harmed the Middle Eastern and North African community in the United States. According to Platt and O'Leary's "Patriot Acts" (2003), the USA Patriot Act "reduces constraints on the government's ability to conduct searches, deport suspects, eavesdrop on Internet communications, monitor financial transactions, and crack down on immigrant violations" (Platt and O'Leary, 2003, pg. 8). Combined with the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, this policy allowed the American government broad jurisdiction to question and detain legal residents and American citizens that fit a Middle Eastern profile, all in the name of instilling more counterterrorism

measures. Following the creation of the USA Patriot Act, the Domestic Call-in Registration Program or NSEERS caused “all male citizens over the age of 16 from Muslim majority countries to be interviewed, photographed, and finger-printed by federal immigration agencies” (Platt and O’Leary, 2003, pg. 10). The residual effects of 9/11 on the MENA community in the United States has continually diminished civil liberties in the form of discriminatory federal policies, provoking hate crimes and biases that have profound societal impact to this day.

Although existing literature has addressed the Arab experience, the impact on Arab communities in policies enacted after the attacks on 9/11, and the construction of an Arab identity post-9/11, the literature surrounding the Persian experience is scarce. “Backlash 9/11: Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans Respond” by Anny Bakalian and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, details a comprehensive history of the treatment of Middle Easterns and Muslims after 9/11 through incidents of bias, hate crime reports, and governmental policies that target majority Muslim groups in the United States (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 2009). Although Borzorgmehr addresses government initiatives against Muslim minority groups in the United States, he does not account for federal and state policies created after 2007, of which the Obama and Trump Administration had significant impact. This study will narrate an extensive review of immigration policies towards Iranians in particular, focusing on broadening the timeline from the events of 9/11 in 2001 to 2020.

The events of 9/11 forever altered the conduct of United States foreign policy towards the Iranian government. In former President George W. Bush’s 2002 State of the Union address, he utilized a metaphor involving Iran, North Korea, and Iraq in what he described as the “axis of evil” (Ghumman, 2002). Although the Iranian response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were of condemnation by President Khatami and aid in the form of joining the United Nations’

anti-terror campaign, President Bush targeted Iran as a leader in the state-sponsored terrorism (Ghumman, 2002). The status of the Iranian government as one of a state sponsor of terror began to restructure how the United States and their citizens, as well as their allies, perceived the War on Terror and the role of Iran in Middle Eastern relations (Heradstveit and Bonham, 2007).

Terrorism and its Implications on Immigration Policy:

To understand the nuanced relationship between the United States and Iran, it is necessary to engage in a discussion surrounding the concept of “terrorism,” and its impacts on the Iranian community immigrating to the United States. Studies have found that the convoluted definition of terrorism has impacted immigration policy, particularly those immigrating from countries within the Middle East and North Africa (Bauder, 2011; Fayazi, 2017; Kephart, 2006; Schmid, 2016; Tumlin, 2004; Weatherall, 2016). In “Iran: Is it Really the Leading State-Sponsor of Terrorism?” by Negar Fayazi (2017), she describes the convoluted definition of terrorism and asks the question, “Does Iran really fund terrorism and if Iran claimed to be a ‘state sponsor of terrorism,’ could the same not be said for the US and its allies, especially in the Middle East?” (Fayazi, 2017). Fayazi describes the various definitions of terrorism, stating that the United Nation member states do not have an agreed upon definition of terrorism, and has hindered appropriate the creation of measures to prevent such activities (Fayazi, 2017). This article later delves into why the United States could also be considered a terrorist state under the similar position they hold Iran in, funding proxy wars in the Middle East and North Africa that can also be classified as being a “sponsor of terrorism.” As understood by the United States’ Code of Federal Regulations, the current definition is, “the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment

thereof, in furtherance of political or social activities” (Federal Bureau of Investigations, 2002). This article is necessary to understand the complexities behind why the United States and Iran have a frayed relationship, and provides context to how terrorism is framed in literature regarding immigration, particularly following the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

Quite similarly, Karen Tumlin’s “Suspect First: How Terrorism Policy is Reshaping Immigration Policy” incorporates the argument that the American definition of terrorism, when utilized by the United States Department of Homeland Security, is shaping immigration policy. Through the transfer of the Presidential Office of Homeland Security (OHS) to the Department of Homeland Security, the change allowed broader jurisdiction of the Department of Homeland Security to shape immigration policy towards their notion of what terrorism is. In this article, Tumlin defines a specific type of profiling that occurs when law enforcement scrutinizes immigrants, stating, “Immigration-plus profiling conflates nationality with religion and targets immigrants from nations with sizable Muslim populations for selective enforcement of immigration laws” (Tumlin, 2004). The concept of immigration plus-profiling has caused the unlawful detainment, surveillance, arrest, and deportation of individuals and embedded itself within immigration policy, most notably the Domestic Call-In Registration program. In 2002, Iranian nationals with non-legal permanent status along with nationals from other countries within MENA, were subject to tracking of their entry and exit. As a result, one quarter of those registered faced deportation (Tumlin, 2004). This concept helps situate Iran in immigration policy literature, and aids in understanding why Iranians today face instances of discrimination and harassment by law enforcement in public areas such as the airport and at the borders.

The narratives surrounding terrorism and immigration policy in the United States is often misrepresented through the conduction of risk analyses centered on the probability of a

foreign-born terrorist attack (Choi, 2018; Nowrasteh, 2015, 2021). In Alex Nowrasteh's "Terrorism and Immigration: A Risk Analysis," he presents data that analyzes the likelihood of a terrorist attack perpetrated by immigrants utilizing every American visa category. Performing a cost-benefit analysis on the "human deaths, property damage, injuries, and economic disruption caused by terrorism," and the economic benefit of limiting immigration (Nowrasteh, 2015). Nowrasteh concludes by stating that foreign-born terrorism is a highly improbable event, and provides the solution of devoting more resources towards screening immigrants. Historically, we have seen the use of counterterrorism measures and policies poorly executed, targeting nationals with ties to Muslim-majority countries. To properly combat terrorism, we must look to define the term and speak to members of the communities who have been historically targeted by American counterterrorism policies.

The State of Religious Minorities in Iran:

As this study includes the voices of non-Muslim religious minorities such as Bahais and Christians, it is imperative to reference their history since the installation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. During the era of the Iranian Revolution, the Bahai and Christian population of Iran were accused by the Shiite clergymen of collaborating with the SAVAK and conspiring with Western countries to spy on the Iranian government (MacEoin, 1987). Hence, the Islamic State only recognizes Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism as true religions, considering religious minorities such as Bahais, Mandeans, and other sects of Islam in Iran as "unprotected infidels and tolerated non-believers," or *dhimmis* (Kazemzadeh, 2000). The status of *dhimmis* in Iran have granted certain protections against marginalization and persecution, such as conducting

their own “matters of personal affairs and religious education” and “are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies” according to Article 13 of the Iranian Constitution (The Constitution Project, 2018). Due to the nature of the state-run education system, religious minorities such as Christians and Bahais which comprise of 0.13% and 1.79% of the Iranian population respectively, are still forced to conform to Shiite Islamic teachings and principles or face harassment from government authorities and the Ministry of Education to ensure Islamic mores supersede that of the religious minority (Choksy, 2012). These conditions, coupled with the harsh economic conditions that Iran has faced in the twenty-first century, have caused religious minorities to seek asylum in other countries with more opportunities (PAAIA, 2014).

Written into the Islamic constitutional framework, recognition of Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity as *dhimmi*s has afforded smaller privileges that unrecognized religions such as the Bahai were not able obtain, such as seats in the parliament. Although the largest unrecognized religious minority, the Bahai have no “official representation within Iran’s parliament and other government institutions” (Choksy, 2012). Lack of proper representation within the Iranian government has allowed for the Baha’i community to be systemically marginalized and persecuted for practicing their religion. Since the inception of the Islamic Republic, the Iranian Baha’i population has been targeted by the government “in order to purify the Islamic Republic from the wrong ideology” (Danesh, 1988). The Bahai population in Iran have been subject to marginalization in the form of property seizure, as “hospitals, community centers, libraries, and even cemeteries were seized without any legal basis or justification” (Kazemzadeh, 2000). The Baha’i faith in Iran was eventually criminalized with the legislative act of 1983, when the Iranian Attorney-General banned the practice and organization of the religion (Danesh, 1998). Fleeing persecution and possible death, the Bahai community in Iran

has become a highly researched population due to their forced migration to other countries, seeking asylum as refugees (Schmeidel, 1997). As of 2002, the Bahai population in the United States stands at roughly 60,000 adult followers and continues to grow with increased oppression by the Iranian government (Cole, 2002).

Although recognized by the Iranian government, the status of *dhimmis* for Christians in Iran has not allowed them to evade oppression and discrimination. A rather sizable population in Iran, the Christian population is estimated to be at 270,000-500,000 active practitioners, with the majority of practitioners also identifying as Armenian or Assyrian (Benjamin, 2018). According to Francis-Dehqani's "Christianity in South and Central Asia" (2019), oppression and marginalization of Christians is growing at a rapid pace. In 2018, more than "90 Christians were detained in prison and with a few exceptions, have been kept under close supervision, all public Persian-speaking churches in Iran have either been closed or forbidden to use the Persian language in worship" (Francis-Dehqani, 2019, pg. 83). Iranian Christians, especially Christian converts, are susceptible to surveillance and discrimination by the Iranian government. Although practicing Christianity is protected under the Iranian Constitution, conversion from Shiite Islam to Christianity in Iran (apostasy) is regarded by the Iranian government as a crime punishable by death due to the treasonous nature of the violation (Francis-Dehqani, 2019). Thus, Christian converts and Christians alike must conduct their religious teachings in private to evade any unnecessary aggravation from the Iranian government.

SECTION IV: METHODOLOGY

Throughout the course of this study, 12 Iranians, all with varying visa application statuses, participated through a thirty to sixty-minute semi-structured interview conducted over the video platform Zoom. The participants for this study were recruited through a two step process through an implementation of purposive sampling first and snowball sampling last. Utilizing a retrospective study research design approach, participants were asked to recall their experiences immigrating to the United States, and were asked questions about how the terrorist attacks of 9/11 had impacted their immigration experience. Additionally, due to the rise of xenophobia (particularly Islamophobia), participants were to recall instances of discriminatory or xenophobic encounters while navigating the United States immigration system and policies put in place after the events of 9/11 that may have significantly impacted their immigration experience. Further questions included the process of assimilation into American culture and society, as well as if the participants have gained a newfound sense of community upon arriving in the United States.

Sample and Sampling Frame:

In order to participate in this study, interviewees must have identified as an Iranian immigrant over the age of 18, beginning their process of immigration to the United States between the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the day of President Joseph Biden's Inauguration, January 20, 2021. I utilized purposive sampling to explicitly collect data from the Iranian community. First, I used my existing networks as an Iranian. Secondly, I used snowball

sampling to identify additional participants that fit the criteria of this study. To recruit outside of my network, I created a Google form to recruit participants that stated the purpose of the study, a brief description of privacy, name of participant, phone number, email, and if they had known anyone else that fits my aforementioned criteria that was interested in interviewing. Additionally, I had recruited participants through the utilization of social media by contacting various Facebook groups as well as non-profits serving the Persian community in the greater Seattle area. Initially, I had reached out to them through text once and waited approximately three days for their response. If they did not respond in the three-day timeframe, I texted and emailed them one more time. When they did not answer, I gave the participant a phone call as a final method of getting in touch with them. Once participants were recruited, I sent out a consent form to existing participants as dictated by the University of Washington Internal Review Board (IRB)¹, and received written consent from participants which were then gathered in the University of Washington Google account. All participants recruited were between the ages of 20 to 47 with four participants identifying as women, and eight participants identifying as men. Of the major persecuted religions in Iran, six participants identified as Baha'i and two participants identified as Christian. All participants immigrated to the United States between 2001-2017 from Northern and Central Iran.

¹ To conduct this study, approval from the Internal Board of Review (IRB) was necessary. Once the purpose of the study and research question was finalized, an application to the University of Washington Human Subjects Division was sent, including the aforementioned details, amount of participants, methodology, and methods of recruitment. In accordance with Caleb Jones, an IRB Coordinator, this study (STUDY00013130) was approved with category 2 exemption.

Data Collection Procedures:

Prior to beginning the data collection process, a consent form was sent to the participant that included potential risks and benefits of participation, researcher title, department and institution, school address, purpose of the research, length of interview, their role in the interview process, their rights to privacy and confidentiality, rights to withdraw from the interview, my contact information, and their printed name and signature. Once the interviews began, audio recording and transcription through Zoom of the interview was collected. Following the semi-structured interview format, broader questions were asked and the participant was occasionally asked to go more into detail if necessary. The main question of this study that all participants were asked was if they were able to describe their story of immigrating to the United States in detail. Probing questions included if they participated in mandatory military service, the impact of 9/11 on their immigration process, the impact of the Travel Ban under the Trump Administration, and the assimilation process into American culture and systems. All interviews were conducted within the time frame of June 3, 2021 to June 10, 2021.

Coding and Analysis:

Utilizing a qualitative thematic analysis method, data from the interviews were transcribed and split into separate themes. According to Braun and Clarke, thematic analysis is a “method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data” (Braun and Clark, 2006). Using Braun and Clarke’s six-fold approach to thematic analysis, data was coded and analyzed into separate themes and smaller subthemes. These steps include: familiarizing yourself with

your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun and Clark, 2006, pg. 87). Throughout the course of this study, verbal data was gathered through the transcription feature on the video-chatting platform Zoom. To combat the inaccuracy in the transcription feature, I rewatched all Zoom meetings and fixed the transcripts manually to reflect what the interview participant had said verbatim. The data was then analyzed and codified to reflect the broader themes of the interviews. Once these codes had been created, the process of grouping similar codes together to create broader themes and subthemes began, coded into four separate themes and containing multiple subthemes. All codified data is present in the results section of this study.

SECTION V: RESULTS

Below, I present the findings from my study. This section consists of quotations from twelve different Iranian participants, all in various stages of their application process. These quotations were then separated into four different broad themes with three to seven sub themes. Within the data, participants often recalled incidents of violence and abuse. Some of these quotes are presented below. To protect the participant's identity, some interviewees opted to use a moniker to conceal their identity, marked by an asterisk next to their alias. The participants from this study include the following:

Afsaneh Teymoori*, a participant that came to the United States with her husband on a spousal visa.

Ali Shakeri, a participant that came to the United States on a student visa.

Borna Borhani, a participant that came to the United States seeking asylum with his family.

Changiz Rastegar*, a participant that came to the United States with his family on a family-based immigrant visa.

Elnaz Derakhshani*, a participant that came to the United States to seek asylum with her family.

Jafar Abtahi*, a participant that came to seek asylum in the United States with his family.

Negin Bozorgi*, a participant that came to the United States to seek asylum with her family.

Nima Motezadian, a participant that came to the United States on a family-based visa.

Peyman Modiri*, a participant that came to the United States to seek asylum.

Rostam Piroozfar*, a participant that came to the United States to seek asylum with his family.

Sepi Khan, a participant that came to the United States to seek asylum with his family.

Shakiba Bayegan, a participant that came to the United States to seek asylum with her family.

THEME #1: IMMIGRATION PROCESS BEGAN IN A SEPARATE COUNTRY

Due to the frayed relations between Iran and the United States, all asylum seekers and immigrants were required to travel to another country that contained a US embassy. Along with Cuba and Syria, the designation of Iran as a state sponsor of terror causes Iranian nationals to embark Iran to other countries with better relations such as Armenia, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey for upwards of several months to several years (United States Department of State, 2021). Citing reasons such as the frustration with the Islamic system, suppression of the press, lack of freedom and democracy, many Iranians chose to leave Iran to pursue a new life in the United States (Torbat, 2002). Thus, all twelve Iranian applicants regardless of their status, noted

leaving their home country of Iran to go to a US embassy in another country to achieve United States legal residency, asylum, or citizenship status.

One participant recalled his experience going to the American embassy in Switzerland to obtain his visa:

“So because the US doesn't have an embassy in Iran, the Swiss embassy is there. I forget what the term is kind of their protectorate or whatever it's like inside of the Swiss embassy. As you know, the US has offices so overall it was fine. It was just nerve racking obviously sitting in the waiting room. And just waiting to be called up but again I didn't have to go through like the questioning and so for me was a little bit simpler but I could you know you could just see sometimes the anxiety or the frustration and my parents' face.” (Changiz Rastegar)

Another participant described her experience going to the American embassy in Turkey as a first step to seeking asylum:

“...Back in 2008, we decided to emigrate out of Iran to the United States because my main reason was because of our religion. We were behind in Iran. And so, you know, they're very strict with Baha'is and sometimes, like they even put them in jail or execute them. And so we realized me and my sister, our chances of getting our education completed were very low. So my family decided to and that's when we decided to come to the United States and we first went to Turkey and we were

there for three years as an immigrant, and then after three years, we got to the United States.” (Shakiba Bayegan)

Subtheme: Invasive Questions

By “invasive questions,” I refer to the type and intensity of questions Iranian immigrants receive from immigration officials. During the interview process, all participants regardless of immigrant or refugee status would be subject to invasive questions by US officials. Due to the poor state of relations between the United States and Iran, immigrants and refugees were asked about their affiliation to the Iranian government and military, ties to their religion, and their everyday lives in Iran. Refugees were asked direct questions about what led them to flee Iran, often causing the participant to recollect distressing memories. Two participants recall these events below.

One participant recalls the questions they asked him, and noted that this process could trigger unwelcome memories:

“‘When did they arrest her [his mother]?’ ‘What happened?’ ‘Who did you have interactions with or like when?’ ‘When did you go to prison?’ Stuff like questions like that, which basically they went through all your memories and just try to answer all the questions as carefully as you can. So, yeah. But they basically just want to know like the events that led you to think that you have to run away for your life. For the last, a lot of times it can be complicated or hard for some people,

because religious asylum is not all the only type of asylum that people get. A lot of times, it could be like domestic violence, and they would ask you a question that would trigger memories that you don't want to know about or that you don't want to talk about but it's a necessary part of the process.” (Rostam Piroozfar)

Another participant recalled the questions the immigration officials asked him during his interview:

“The questions were terrible. Like, have I ever joined the army, or am I part of the like terrorist group, or like, what that terrorist group is called, I don't know. They asked me about how I spend my day. What school, where I'm going to work, what is my plan for the future. And they ask about things like, whatever happened to me in Iran. Like, just some brief question. And, yeah, a bunch of questions about the army in Iran.” (Sepi Khan)

All participants in this study needed to go to another country to start their immigration process at United States embassies abroad. Most notably, Switzerland, Turkey, New Zealand, and Italy were mentioned when participants were asked about which country they went to start their visa application. During the interview portion of their visa application process, all participants were asked very personal questions about their lives in Iran and what led them to fleeing the country. Participants who sought asylum in the United States were asked particularly difficult questions that addressed the abuse and trauma they had faced in Iran.

THEME #2- VISA INADMISSIBILITY OR DENIAL

While interviewing, three participants had recalled similar experiences of their family members that attempted to obtain their visas or legal residency at the same time were denied, while others were granted their visa. Visa denials are often the result of not completing the visa application in its entirety, remaining longer than authorized in the United States, and being ineligible for the visa category (United States Department of State, 2021). The denial of visas for family members can often result in the ineligibility of applying for a visa again in a certain time frame, leading to a precarious situation for family members who have different visa applications.

One applicant describes his family's experience with his brother's visa application process:

“...the one thing that was kind of a bummer, was that my oldest brother wasn't able to get a green card with the rest of the family. Hey like said so like this. there's, there's the parents and four boys. The oldest brother, he wasn't able to come with us. I guess he was too old to or that he couldn't have applied for the green card. No, that doesn't make sense. I forgot what it was. But yeah, you couldn't get the rest of the family.” (Borna Borhani)

Another participant recalls his experience with his brother's visa application denial:

“I think it [visa application process] was about six months or a year, where we heard something back and then that's how we went. And then they told us that you

should come in for an interview and then they interviewed us. And then two weeks later, we got a phone call. Basically we can apply for our green card after one year of being inside of it [United States], which my dad did about a few months ago. And we could have done it a year earlier. My brother just didn't get the green card. But yeah like me and my dad already applied for our green cards”
(Rostam Piroozfar)

Subtheme: Visa Inadmissibility if Served in the Military

In instances where the participant or someone they know was a soldier in the Iranian military or a *sarbaz*, there was an extremely complicated visa process or no visa was issued depending on the status of the individual in the military. Since the designation of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization in 2019, immigrants and refugees who have served in the IRGC are susceptible to inadmissibility into the United States. All Iranian men over the age of 18 are required to participate in mandatory military service for two years, and are assigned their positions at random (Emerick, 2021). Three participants had recollected their experiences with the Iranian army and how this impacted their immigration process to the United States.

Once participant describes his family’s exemption from serving in the Iranian military and the impact it has on other families applying for visas:

“So I got an exemption, because my dad was not able to serve. My dad is disabled so I got an exemption. But even getting an exemption is a tough process. And

they usually say ‘oh you gotta serve like two years in the military.’ But since we are giving the exemption we've got to make the process really hard. So some people just give up, and they just go serve the military for two years, even though there are, they're eligible for exemption. So, yeah, the process took me like to get the exemption, in like a month. And I didn't have time because we already had an interview. And we had to reschedule the interview two times. So he was kind of, we had to make it to the interview. Otherwise you wouldn't be able to get the visa right. I really worked really hard to get the exemption.” (Nima Motezedian)

Another participant recalled an acquaintance of his being denied asylum into the United States due to his position in the Iranian army:

“I know a friend who had a friend, who had come to Turkey around the same time. But the man was working the same as someone in military service but was rejected because of working there and having carried a gun with himself. He was also a pilot, he was an F-16 pilot. He wasn't major in the Iranian Air Force. So the reason he was a refugee there was because his commander asked him to drop the bomb on a Kurdish village. And he refuses, and he really is thinking about deserting. So when they find out, they want to order him to death. He spent two years in the IRGC. I was in the army for two months. It's a horrible situation. Already the jail you're in, it's a nightmare. All of his teeth are broken. And when he came to Turkey as a refugee. Now, he had to deal with the Turkish intelligence, too” (Peyman Modiri).

Subtheme: Fearing Visa Denial

Participants also recalled the need to find a delicate balance of things to say during immigration interview, otherwise fearing denial of their US visa application or asylum. The participants often remembered their experiences with Iranian officials involving harassment or excessive questioning, which translated into their experience interviewing with Iranian immigration officials. Seven participants recall having feelings of fear, anxiety, and caution while navigating their interview process with US immigration officials.

One participant recalled his experience with officials in Iran and how this transferred into being interviewed by a US official:

“We were super scared at first because we thought it's going to be like the experiences that we've had in Iran of going to jail. As I'm talking to all those immigration officials it reminded me of the religious militia or whatever. Like that was not a good experience so we were all like that like having that in the back of our minds like it was like anything that had to do with like getting interviewed by government officials sounded scary.” (Rostam Piroozfar)

Another participant recalled his thoughts while a US official was interviewing him:

“You know, on one hand, it was interesting because I never was asked these questions in my life. On the other hand, like the lady that was asking, I mean, maybe that's her job like I'm not blaming her but like she was like so mean but like she was an associate. And that was kind of scary for me, like, oh my god. It makes me to think, ‘Oh, is that answer is going to be right or wrong,’ which is that there's no wrong or right answer. Whatever happens in my life I just said that and the truth. But like the way that she would look at me, I'm like okay, maybe I said the wrong answer.” (Sepi Khan)

Most participants recalled feeling generally anxious prior and during their interviews with US immigration officials, stemming from their experiences in Iran with Iranian soldiers and officials. The participants felt as if they had said the wrong thing during the interview process, and in turn, felt as if they would be denied a visa. During the interviews with immigration officials, if the participant mentioned that they had served in the military, they faced extra scrutiny and their visa could be denied. If the participant were to apply for exemption, the immigration process would take much longer and some visa applicants would need to remove themselves from the visa application process entirely, causing them to join the army. Once the participant was in the United States seeking legal residency, they began to file for green cards. Several participants recalled that some of their family members were not able to receive a green card, although they applied at approximately the same time.

THEME #3- DIFFICULTIES TRAVELING AS AN IRANIAN CITIZEN

Five participants noted having a difficult time leaving the country, citing that travel was a big issue for them. According to the Global Passport Power Index, Iran has one of the lowest mobility passport ranks in the world, ranking number 38. Iranian citizens are only able to travel to six countries visa-free and are required to have a visa for 160 countries (Global Passport Power Index, 2021). Their passport mobility and the increased scrutiny at border and airports made the participants feel as if they are stationary, not being able to travel outside the country. Participants thought back to their time travelling, and cited that it was one of their biggest concerns while in the United States:

One participant recalled his experience travelling across the border from Canada to United States:

“...When I moved here I first went to Canada for a month, because I had some cousins in Vancouver. And then, when we were ready to move, you know, when we actually moved to America we crossed the border by car. We didn't have any friends yet right, so we'd always go back to Canada. And so we'd always cross the border, and the US officials they would always keep us there for like six hours, you know, really annoying. So that was kind of stressful but yeah and then but over time it grew better. (Borna Borhani)

Another participant described the travel ban against Iranians and the impact he has seen on the Iranian community:

“Stress free travel. I mean, I think. I think that geopolitics that just the politics of it all is impacting ordinary Iranians, far more than it should, or needs to and that's and that's kind of having a spillover. And it's separating families, and you know I don't mean to compare it to what's happening at the southern border because that's abhorrent and that's, you know, that was on another level [the family separation policy]. But this was, but this travel ban is a form of family separation that you are forcibly cutting off people from their families as a punitive measure against the government, or some other entity so it, it puts ordinary people in the line of fire, who had nothing to do with anything in the first place so my hope is that there's more exchange” (Changiz Rastegar)

Participants often recall feeling high levels of stress when crossing borders or travelling at the airport. Recognizing the difficulties travelling as an Iranian national and how they would be subject to detainment, denial of entry, and excessive questioning, most participants wished for a less strenuous process that allowed them to travel with ease. Additionally, policies such as the Travel Ban put in place by the federal government against minorities have targeted these individuals in the public sphere in places such as the airport. As referenced in my interviews, these policies have led to an increase in family separation, impacting Iranian nationals when the disputes are between the American and Iranian governments.

THEME #4- OPPRESSION AND DISCRIMINATION IN THE UNITED STATES AND ABROAD

For all participants that identified as asylum seekers that came to the United States from Iran, there was a specific incident interview participants could recall that made them feel unsafe in Iran and instigated their process of immigration into the United States. As the majority of interview participants are Bahai'i or Christian, persecuted religious minorities in Iran, many participants could recall events related to stalking, physical abuse, emotional abuse, mental abuse, and unfair treatment. Some of these quotes are presented below.

One participant, who identifies as a follower of Christianity, described his departure from Iran:

“So, basically our parents changed our religion to Christianity. We lived on Kish Island. I think you already know about it. It's like an island in the Persian Gulf. We've been living there for a few years. One day my dad was in an elevator with this guy with a Bible. Well then someone found out about it. We started getting dressed and stuff. Apparently they somehow followed us and stuff and it was like super scary. So like my dad sent me and my mom and my brother to Turkey. I was there for three months, but he was just scared of anything happening. My mom got arrested once as well. We were at a baptism ceremony. Anyways, um yeah, we moved to Turkey and then were there for three months” (Rostam Piroozfar)

Another participant describes his experience as a Baha'i in Iran:

“So we lived on the top and my aunt lives in the first floor. So, the, you know, there's called VAJA. Now let's call it like, you know, in the United States we have CIA so in Iran. They had like VAJA which is like a part of the government. Anyways, so they came to our house, because we're Baha'i they collect all the books, our prayers, our computers and laptops. Whatever that we have, they collect all of them. The thing is, I was talking to one of my friends a couple of weeks ago. So I don't have any pictures of myself from the age of five, until 10 like I have no picture at that age. Yeah, they collect all the photos, videos, like everything. Anyway, that's what was happening when I was in seventh grade, so after that happened and also they took my aunt's husband to prison for four years. So after them like every day of our life was either thinking 'like okay something is going to happen to myself or my dad'. Like, you know, like in a school. I was kind of shy but like when someone says something, I'm not gonna just sit in the corner. Anyway, so what happened on the, like, and those years after like we see that, okay so our lives are going to be in danger in Iran like somehow. So, my parents decided that we should move to the United States. So we went to Turkey.”

(Sepi Khan)

Subtheme: Discrimination in the United States

Once in the United States, the eight interview participants recalled events where they had faced microaggressions or instances of discrimination while inside the country. These microaggressions and instances of discrimination included being targeted for being Muslim,

Middle Eastern stereotypes, and being mocked for their accents. Multiple interview participants recalled their specific instances of discrimination:

One participant recalled how his friend's father did not want him to look a certain way for soccer tryouts:

“Oh, that's one thing one of my Iranian friends did was he would shave. Because his dad told them that. So, every time you go to soccer tryouts, he would shave his full beard, because his dad told him, ‘You don't want to look like a terrorist in front of these Americans and trying out.’ And it's like, ‘oh shoot your own dad saying that.’ Yeah. But at the same time like it's true though, you don't want to look intimidating towards them.” (Borna Borhani)

Another participant referenced the Blaine Border Crisis involving Iranian nationals in January of 2020:

“As somebody who's active in the Iranian American community here. I certainly can point to a specific incidents of xenophobia towards our community here, most notably, what happened to Americans of Iranian descent, at the US,-Canada Border in January 2020. It was a brazen violation of civil rights and it was targeted and considering what was happening at the time and the sudden rising tensions and between us and Iran and it just felt very if out very clearly targeted and unnecessary. And so, I, you know, even though I wasn't myself at the border

but the fact that the community that I work with, and I worked for and I'm a part of was targeted in that way, definitely made it personal.” (Changiz Rastegar)

Another participant referenced the discrimination she felt at the airport as an Iranian:

“I mean, in Iran, there was one in the United States and the racism part where we first came here. I remember my sister, she was older than me and she kind of knew English, way better than I did. I didn't know anything. And apparently the people who are working at the airport knew that we were part of immigrants coming in, and they were just very racist and rude towards like all of us. And that was really shocking to my sister and it's obviously very sad and me personally I still to this day sometimes experience racism just because of how I look.”

(Shakiba Bayegan)

Participants, especially if they identified as a religious minority in Iran, could recall a specific event that led to leaving Iran in search of a better life in the United States. To escape the discrimination in the form of abuse, job denial, and raids, participants were forced to flee to another country to begin their immigration process before eventually coming to the United States. Following the attacks on September 11, 2001 when discrimination against those of Middle Eastern descent were increasing, Iranians began to be targeted for their ethnic identity. Iranians were subject to harassment and name-calling because of their background.

THEME #5- NAVIGATING AND ASSIMILATING TO AMERICAN SYSTEMS

When participants were asked if Iranians have built a community of other Iranians in the United States, nine participants stated that they did. From fellow Iranian-Americans, school friends, and college friends, the participants have created smaller networks to ensure they have the necessary support upon arrival to the United States. Once in the United States, participants relied on those contacts to navigate American systems and culture.

One participant stated how he felt supported by family members here, but emphasized the need for a bolstered support system for new Iranian arrivals:

“And so, especially in a community like Seattle where the Iranian community, even though there's a decent sized community here we are not established there's no established support system for new arrivals for Iranians who move here. Without knowing anybody here. You know Iranians have I know so many cases of people who want the Green Card Lottery, and then came here without any preparation, and that's all they could do. You know there's once you get the Green Card Lottery, there's a timeline within which you have to move and so you move here. And, and you have to start from scratch, and our family had to go through that and I feel so privileged they made all the difference having family here. And so that's something that's a partial vision for our community here locally, is that we have a support network, where people, when they move here from Iran, know where to go to seek help because right now.” (Changiz Rastegar)

Another participant described her network in the United States:

“Yeah, I actually have several. I mean, there's my work community there is my family. There is friends there that you know are American but then there's friends who were all were immigrants and we still keep in touch. So, it's and it's interesting because you learn to kind of deal with different groups based on what the situation is, so you kind of become more versatile in that aspect.” (Negin Bozorgi)

Subtheme: Difficulties with the American Education System

When asked about what the most shocking experience of coming to America was, four participants cited American systems, most specifically the American education system as a barrier in understanding American culture and society. Participants recalled their experience with American systems:

One participant spoke of his experience in an American high school:

“I started high school in the Kenmore area if you're familiar with that part of town, and yeah I was 14 at the time and it was, You know, having visited the US, definitely helped. So it didn't it wasn't all new and uncharted territory. But yeah and so moving here was very different than just visiting over the summer so having to adapt and go to school. It's a very, very different school experience here in the US, than it is in Iran, and many aspects you know in terms of mix up genders in the schools, kind of your schedule structure and the fact that you have

lunch at school were in Iran, we didn't. What we had access to here in schools here in my high school did not even compare to what I had access to in Iran, so it was a challenging experience but I'm better for it.” (Changiz Rastegar)

Another participant spoke of his brother’s experience in an American high school:

“[In reference to his brother] At first he wanted to move. I don't know if you remember, but for the first two years or so he just wanted to move back like every single day. He went to high school and he was like, ‘yeah, I'm done with this.’ Like this place. He told me he failed his grade. Yeah, he went to high school and he was like ‘I don't like it.’ And then he said he just started to genuinely like America in college, or like Running Start. It was kind of hard to like become a part of the school culture. That is, I don't know if you know much about your school but it's way different than here. Like you probably already know that both boys and girls go to separate schools. That thing was a big issue but like I said that was really hard for me to find friends, I guess, because everybody had their own groups of friends so it was hard for me to know people. But for the second half of senior year, I felt more comfortable. I guess I had my own friends and am still in contact with some of them. But like, it was still very, very hard for me to, like, interact with people because I didn't know the culture that well.” (Rostam Piroozfar)

Most participants that have immigrated or sought asylum in the United States have found a community of Iranians that have been through similar processes and experiences that they have. However, it was revealed that the need to bolster these services and support systems are necessary for Iranians that are newly arriving into the United States. Once in the United States, younger participants that have experienced the school system in Iran and the United States reported having an adjustment period where they could get used to the language and culture.

SECTION VI: CONCLUSION

This final chapter summarizes the overall experiences of Iranian nationals navigating the American immigration system while providing final context on how Iranians are specifically impacted and targeted by the American immigration system. I will then discuss the limitations this particular study faces and insight as to how this study could be improved if conducted by future researchers. I will also be discussing policy recommendations that could improve the American immigration system, especially as it pertains to Iranians and their unique experiences.

Discussion:

The qualitative data gathered from these twelve interviews indicate that Iranians face significant barriers in immigrating or seeking asylum in the United States. Due to the volatile relations the United States has with Iran, all participants needed to go to a separate country with better relations with the United States to start their visa application process or to seek asylum as Iran does not have a US embassy. Countries that participants listed were Turkey, Italy, Switzerland, and New Zealand. While interviewing with immigration officials, participants often talked about how they were subject to intrusive questions including their ties to the Iranian government, what led them to flee Iran, if they participated in Iranian army, and their ties to any Iranian-backed terrorist groups. Due to counterterrorism measures and policies in place after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the United States and the broad jurisdiction the Department of Homeland Security has, the government has continually equated immigration with security to prevent another attack. Seeing as my participants have all immigrated after 9/11, the questions

they were asked during their interview wholly reflect the current state of counterterrorism measures by the American government.

Interview participants also noted a general fear of visa inadmissibility or denial due to the answers they gave the immigration officials when interviewed during the visa application process. Although this can be attributed to general fear and anxiety disorders that the participant did not disclose, many reported that their experiences with Iranian officials in the past had a detrimental effect on how they viewed the interviews with US officials. Their experiences with Iranian officials entailed borderline abuse and provoked emotions of fear and anxiety about retaliation from the government due to their religion or gender. This fear of visa rejection also stems from their background participating in the Iranian military. As the Iranian government requires all men over the age of 18 to complete two years of mandatory military service and randomly assigns the citizen a position, many visa applicants automatically become ineligible for an American visa. If the participant was granted entry to the United States and began their process of applying for legal residency, some family members were granted the visa while others were rejected. Three of my interview participants found themselves in this difficult situation, but did not specify the exact reasons as to why their family members were rejected. Possible reasons include the family's inability to financially provide for the visa applicant, they were deemed as a public health risk, or have overstayed their visa (CitizenPath, 2019).

Once receiving their green cards, many participants noted difficulties of stressful travel, particularly out of the country. As Iranians have a very low passport mobility, they are required to acquire visas prior to arriving at 160 countries across the globe (Global Passport Power Index, 2021). According to the US Citizenship and Immigration Services, green card holders are required to bring various forms of identification including their green cards, passport, and

driver's license as well as complete the necessary entry and exit requirements for the country they visit (US Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2021). Combined with the excessive questioning Iranian nationals receive at American airports, the participants in this study have felt stressors while crossing borders.

Participants that identified as a religious minority in Iran could recall a particular event that facilitated their move to the United States. When in Iran, persecuted minorities faced significant hurdles in obtaining a job, practicing their religion, and being fairly treated at schools. Participants would often recollect memories of incidents of abuse at the hands of Iranian officials, often seen as the turning point to escape Iran in search of a better life. Once the participant was in Iran, they faced microaggressions and instances of discrimination to a lesser degree. Participants would recall name-calling, wariness of their appearance, and referenced stereotypes about people from the Middle East. Due to the discriminatory policies from after 9/11 and the increase of terrorist attacks during the early twenty-first century, prejudice and discrimination towards minorities that fit a Middle Eastern profile have increased. This could often result in instances of bias or hate crimes, but these occurrences were not reported by my interview participants.

Interview participants, when recollecting the most difficult parts of navigating and assimilating to American culture and systems, reported that the American school system is among the most difficult to get accustomed to. Participants would disclose that making friends, becoming a part of the school's culture, and adjusting to going to school with peers of the opposite gender were the most shocking aspects of assimilating to American systems. As my interview participants are from a country that does not use English as their primary language,

there may have been a language barrier the participants needed to overcome before fully acclimating to life in America.

Limitations:

Due to the younger ages of the participants when they immigrated to the United States, when they were asked about the events of 9/11, many of them could not recall these events in great detail. As many participants were under the age of 18 during their immigration process, many were not able to participate in *sarbazi* (mandatory military service), and in fact, fled the country to avoid becoming a *sarbaz* (soldier) for the Iranian army as it could hinder their immigration process altogether. If this study was continued, the future researcher would need to make sure to include the voices of older participants, from the ages of 35-80, to get a more accurate depiction of how the events of 9/11 personally impacted their immigration process to the United States. Additionally, as this study includes the voices of both Iranian asylum seekers and immigrants, this study would benefit from including the voices of either one or the other for more specified codification. Furthermore, as Iranian women are marginalized in Iran, this study should provide the voices of more women to offer a unique perspective and insight on their challenges navigating the Iranian legal framework and United States immigration system if completed in the future.

Policy Recommendations:

After a thorough review of relevant literature and conducting interviews with Iranian individuals who have navigated the Iranian immigration system, I recommend that the United Nations formulate a cohesive definition for the term “terrorism” that member nations will be able to agree upon. Changing the definition will have direct implications on the counterterrorism policies, as the definition of terrorism is highly conflated even among different institutions within the United States (Fayazi, 2017). In addition, changing the definition of the word “terrorism” to a more unified term will reduce the agency the Department of Homeland Security has over immigration policies within the United States. In turn, this will dramatically decrease the amount of discriminatory policies that impact US citizens who also hold passports from the Middle East and North Africa. After the implementation of this amendment, Iranian nationals applying for visas will no longer feel the harsh scrutiny my participants felt during any point in their immigration process, including their interviews with immigration officials and while travelling across different borders.

My second recommendation is that the US federal government should provide more resources to US embassies abroad in the form of employees to streamline the immigration process. Through removing 10% of the funding directed towards counterterrorism institutions in the annual budget and allocating the funds towards immigration services by 2025, the immigration process will. Many of my participants were frustrated by the length of time they needed to reside in another country without a reliable source of income or not being able to attend school while awaiting news of their visa approval or denial. My participants reported waiting three months to four years in another country while the United States processed their visa application. Allocating more resources directly to US embassies should hasten the immigration process significantly, avoiding the possibility of applicants in limbo in another

country. Providing additional resources to US embassies will gradually eliminate the need for non-profits to frontload the burden once the immigrant arrives in the United States, establishing cheaper alternatives for both the state and federal governments.

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APPENDIX

- Can you tell me your story of immigrating to the United States?
 - What was your experience with the US immigration system like?
 - Can you tell me what it was like meeting with US officials?
- Can you tell me about your experience navigating the pieces around 9/11 and the USA Patriot Act?
 - Do you feel as if you are safer with the current immigration system we have in place? Why or why not?
 - Do you agree with equating security with immigration? Why or why not?
 - Is there anything you don't like about the US immigration system?
 - Do you feel supported by the social services the US provides to immigrants?
 - Is there anything you wish the United States would provide to Iranian immigrants before they move? For example, classes about American systems, culture, etc.?
 - Do you have any thoughts about how the United States could better support Iranian immigrants through law, policy, or your community?
- Did you participate in *sarbazi* (mandatory military service)?
 - Can you tell me what this was like?
 - Did this impact your immigration process?
 - Has this impacted anyone you know and their immigration process into the United States?

- Have you experienced xenophobia or racism while in the United States? Can you tell me what that was like?
 - Do you identify as an ethno religious minority in Iran? How has this impacted your immigration process?
- Can you tell me what it was like for you and your family when Trump announced the Muslim Ban?
 - Did this impact anyone else you know?
- Can you describe your process of assimilation into the United States?
 - Was there anything that shocked you in particular?
 - Have you found a community here in the United States?
- What are your hopes for the future of Iranian immigration into the United States?
- Is there anything you would like to share with me that I have not asked about?