

# Iranian Diaspora: Migration, Memory, and Transnational Politics

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## Introduction

This book begins from a simple observation with complex consequences: the images of Iran that circulate globally are not made only by states and newsrooms, but also by people who live between places—exiles, migrants, and their children. Across neighborhoods, universities, start-ups, cultural venues, and online platforms, members of the Iranian diaspora curate, contest, and circulate meanings of “Iran” every day. Their choices—what to fund, perform, translate, oppose, or celebrate—shape how host societies understand Iranians and how politics in the homeland are imagined from afar. Iranian diasporic life, therefore, is not a side story to national history; it is one of its engines.

The chapters that follow trace successive migration waves since the 1970s and the layered reasons behind them—revolutionary rupture, war, economic restructuring, educational mobility, and the search for safety and opportunity. These waves have settled in distinct urban archipelagos: Los Angeles and Toronto, London and Paris, Berlin and Stockholm, Istanbul and Dubai, among others. Each site offers a different mix of legal regimes, labor markets, racial formations, and media ecologies that condition what becoming “Iranian abroad” looks and feels like. We attend as closely to the bureaucratic textures of visas, asylum systems, and sanctions as to the intimate experiences of loss, aspiration, and reinvention.

A core argument of this book is that the Iranian diaspora is best understood as a set of transnational formations rather than a fixed community. Families, firms, and activist networks operate through durable cross-border ties—care work and remittances, business partnerships and scholarly collaborations, encrypted chats and satellite feeds. These ties redistribute resources, symbols, and risks; they also generate obligations and inequalities. By following money, messages, and memories across borders, we reveal how “home” and “host” are constantly remade in relation to one another.

Diasporic institutions give these flows structure. Professional associations, student unions, cultural centers, religious congregations, and philanthropic foundations provide venues where identities are negotiated and solidarities assembled. They also embody tensions: generational divides over strategy and style; ideological rifts among monarchists, leftists, reformists, feminists, and secularists; and differences shaped by class, region, ethnicity, and faith. Attending to these institutions allows us to see how influence accrues—not only in headline-grabbing moments, but in the patient labor of organizing, translating, mentoring, and fundraising.

Culture is another arena where power travels. Iranian writers, filmmakers, musicians, visual artists, designers, and chefs work as translators between worlds, crafting narratives that can both reinforce and disrupt prevailing frames. Memoirs and novels carry intimate histories into public debate; films and series stage arguments about

gender, authority, and everyday ethics; music, fashion, and food invite embodied participation in diasporic life. Cultural production is not decorative to politics; it is one of its most persuasive instruments.

At the same time, the diaspora is a consequential political actor. Lobbying groups, human rights organizations, feminist networks, student movements, and digital collectives have mobilized across borders to advocate for prisoners, document abuses, challenge sanctions or support them, and shape policy debates in host countries. These activities unfold alongside more troubling dynamics of transnational repression—surveillance, intimidation, and harassment—that attempt to police dissent beyond borders. The result is a fragmented but powerful field of action where strategy, credibility, and care are contested.

Methodologically, this book blends multi-sited ethnography, interviews, archival research, media analysis, and the study of quantitative indicators such as remittance flows and demographic trends. It treats “Iranian” as a capacious, contested category that includes diverse linguistic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, while remaining attentive to the exclusions that such umbrella terms can conceal. Throughout, we foreground ethical considerations: protecting vulnerable interlocutors, resisting sensationalism, and recognizing the uneven risks borne by those who speak and organize from abroad.

The chapters move from histories of departure and settlement to the building of institutions, from cultural production to advocacy and repression, and finally toward futures—return migration, circular mobility, and new imaginaries of belonging. By the end, readers will see how diasporic actors do more than mirror events in Iran; they co-produce the terrain on which Iran is seen and contested globally. In tracing these entanglements, the book offers a framework for understanding how migration, memory, and transnational politics reshape nations far beyond their borders.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: Revolutions, Wars, and Waves: Mapping Iranian Migration Since the 1970s**

The story of the Iranian diaspora is inextricably linked to a series of seismic events that rocked Iran from the late 1970s onward, fundamentally reshaping its political landscape and propelling millions of its citizens beyond its borders. While migration from Persia, as Iran was known until 1934, has a long and varied history, dating back centuries and including diverse groups like Zoroastrians fleeing to India or Baha'is seeking refuge in the Ottoman Empire, the period beginning in the 1970s ushered in a new era of unprecedented, large-scale emigration. This era witnessed distinct waves

of departure, each driven by a complex interplay of political, economic, and social factors.

Prior to the momentous year of 1979, Iranian emigration was primarily characterized by students seeking higher education abroad and professionals pursuing better economic opportunities. The mid-20th century saw Iran undergoing a period of modernization, fueled by oil revenues. This modernization encouraged middle and upper-class families to send their children to universities in the West, particularly to the United States. By the mid-1970s, Iranian students constituted the largest group of foreign students in the United States, a testament to this significant educational mobility. These students, often well-versed in English, were highly sought after by American institutions, further solidifying this pre-revolutionary flow. Many of these individuals would later form the nascent networks that facilitated subsequent, larger migration movements.

The year 1979 dramatically altered this pattern. The Iranian Revolution, which toppled the Pahlavi monarchy and established the Islamic Republic, acted as the primary catalyst for the first major wave of post-1979 emigration. The political upheaval, characterized by intense revolutionary fervor and a rapid restructuring of society, created an environment of profound uncertainty and fear for many. This led to a substantial exodus of Iranians, particularly those associated with the former regime, members of the educated elite, and religious minorities.

Families closely linked to the monarchy, including government officials, military personnel, and bankers, were among the first to flee, often liquidating significant assets before their departure. Simultaneously, minority religious groups such as Baha'is, Jews, Armenians, and Assyrians, anticipating persecution under the new Islamic government, also left in disproportionate numbers. The new theocratic state, largely devoted to Shia Islam, exhibited intolerance towards these minority faiths. This initial wave of departures was primarily driven by political persecution and a stark shift in the country's socio-political fabric.

The revolution's aftermath also saw a significant portion of Iranian students who were already abroad choosing not to return. Universities in Iran were subjected to a "Cultural Revolution" aimed at purging non-Islamic influences, leading to closures and a substantial decline in the number of professors. This further diminished prospects for those pursuing education and intellectual careers within Iran, effectively converting many temporary student stays into permanent exiles.

No sooner had the dust of the revolution begun to settle than Iran was plunged into another devastating conflict: the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). This eight-year war, initiated by Iraq's invasion, further intensified the migration trends, creating what many consider the second major wave of post-revolutionary emigration. Young men eligible for military service, desperate to avoid the brutal frontlines, sought refuge

abroad, often benefiting from asylum laws in Western countries. The war's toll, combined with ongoing political crackdowns and economic hardship, propelled entire middle and upper-class families to seek stability and opportunity outside Iran.

During this period, the legal pathways to emigration for Iranians often involved seeking refugee or asylum status, particularly in the United States. Between the revolution and 1990, refugee status was the most accessible route for legal entry into the U.S. for many Iranians. The numbers reflect this trend: between 1980 and 1990, the population of foreign-born Iranians in the United States increased by 74 percent, with the number of Iranians granted lawful permanent residence peaking in 1990.

The 1990s and early 2000s witnessed subsequent, albeit more varied, waves of migration. While the immediate drivers of revolution and war had subsided, a new set of "push" factors emerged, including economic instability, high unemployment, political repression, and a diminishing sense of opportunity within Iran. The phenomenon of "brain drain," the emigration of highly skilled and educated individuals, became a significant concern during this time, with reports indicating Iran topped lists of countries losing their academic elite. This loss of human capital was attributed to a lack of meritocracy, limited job opportunities, poor working conditions, and low salaries within Iran.

This era also saw a diversification in destination countries, with Iranians increasingly seeking opportunities not only in North America and Europe but also in neighboring countries like Turkey and the Gulf states. The motivations for leaving became increasingly multifaceted, encompassing not only political and religious freedom but also the pursuit of higher education, career advancement, and a general improvement in quality of life. Even as the direct threat of war receded, the desire for a future with greater prospects continued to fuel emigration.

More recently, the 2010s and 2020s have seen an accelerating trend in emigration, sometimes referred to as an "uncontrolled mass emigration." This latest wave is driven by a complex matrix of factors including persistent economic turmoil, currency devaluation, and widespread impacts of global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Political unrest, crackdowns on dissent following protest movements like the Green Movement in 2009 and the "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests of 2022-2023, and a perception of shrinking civil liberties have further exacerbated this outward flow.

What distinguishes this recent wave is the growing participation of individuals from lower socioeconomic classes, alongside the continued departure of the educated elite. This has led to a broadening of destination countries, with the Gulf states and Turkey becoming increasingly important gateways for Iranian migrants. The journeys, particularly for those from less privileged backgrounds, are often perilous, sometimes involving illegal crossings and increased risks.

While the focus here has been on Iranians leaving Iran, it is crucial to acknowledge that Iran itself has also been a significant host country for refugees, particularly from Afghanistan and Iraq, throughout much of this same period. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the subsequent Iran-Iraq War led to millions of Afghans and Iraqis seeking refuge in Iran. This parallel movement of people into and out of Iran highlights the complex and often paradoxical nature of migration in the region.

Each wave of Iranian migration has contributed to the formation of a diverse and dynamic diaspora. From the early student cohorts who laid the groundwork for future communities to the political exiles and war refugees who sought sanctuary, and now to the economic migrants and those fleeing ongoing repression, the Iranian diaspora reflects a wide spectrum of experiences and motivations. These individuals, often highly educated, have settled in various global hubs, contributing to a rich tapestry of Iranian communities that continue to evolve and grow. This ongoing movement of people is not merely a demographic shift; it is a fundamental aspect of Iran's contemporary history, with profound and lasting implications for both the homeland and the host societies where Iranians have found new homes.

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