



Encyclopedia of Immigration and Migration in the American West

Iran-Iraq War and the Migration of Iranian Youth to California

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America's West in the 1980s experienced a new wave of immigrants as never before. The Golden State had always been wealthy Iranians' highly sought-after vacation and investment destination, starting in the late 1940s, but 40 years later, the exciting shorelines of California were sought by other Iranians, those for whom wealth and social class were not necessarily a fundamental part of the background. By 1966, more than 1,000 Iranians lived in the United States. The years between 1960 and 1969 saw the biggest surge of Iranian immigrants to the states: a total of 8,895. The steady climb in the number of immigrants totaled 37,567 by the 1970s. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, which consequently ended the 65-year-old Pahlavi Dynasty and toppled the regime of American-supported Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, opened a new chapter of Middle Eastern history that was to have an affect on the 21st century's global sociopolitical and economic future. The Iraqi government in the hands of strong-man Saddam Hussein initiated a war against Iran in 1980, which lasted more than eight years, causing an unprecedented outflow of male Iranian teenagers and young adults. Their ages ranged between 13 and 20, with the majority of them ultimately heading for the United States in general and California specifically. The number of nonimmigrant Iranians coming to America between 1980 and 1989 broke all previous records, and more than 60 percent of the total 136,202 changed their status to immigrants. Among these émigrés, youths of different faiths and ethnicities, such as Armenians, Assyrians, Baháís, Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Zoroastrians, made the historic journey.

Running away from a violent atmosphere, the base population of Iranian youth found itself between the difficulty of dodging military conscription and the difficulty of attaining an American or European entry visa. One without the other was usually the norm. That is, by paying a high ransom, one could obtain a passport to leave the country, but the destination was still unknown, because no European country or any nation on the American continent would grant a visa for entry to this group of runaways.

Although the Western European nations, such as Great Britain, Germany, and France, received a large population of Iranian youths, the majority of these immigrants preferred the United States as their permanent home outside of Iran. The peak time of immigration for Iranians, 1975, is the time in history that 90% of the total 224,456 immigrated to the United States, according to the Immigration and Naturalization Service, until 1993. Based on the same source, California received more than half the total number of immigrants (108,572) between 1975 and 1993.

Immigration attorneys and brokers with high-level connections in the Consular Section of the American State Department and local embassies and consulates were the key to obtaining entry permits into the United States for this desperate group of Iranian youth. These miracle workers charged a fee anywhere between \$3,000 and \$25,000 for securing a student, worker, or tourist visa, and the Iranian youth made their way into the United States, with a majority settling in and around Los Angeles.

A free society, along with a world-class educational system, the multiethnic and multinational makeup of California's population, a mild and pleasant climate, a relatively liberal society, and a free market economy, accompanied by a persevering character, decided the Iranian youth to settle in the West. These notable characteristics eventually assisted the young immigrants in their successes, which ultimately led to their unsurpassed contributions to their adopted country through entrepreneurship and scholarship.

The challenge of staying in the West legally and honorably was the next step that these Iranian youths had to take. On settling in their newfound home in California, the Iranian youth had to overcome numerous challenges. These challenges, however, were met with a certain resilience that can be attributed to the youths' growing up in the time of a bloody revolution and war back in their native land. It can be argued that if one is threatened with the loss of life or the possibility of becoming physically disabled, one does not consider the challenges of learning a new language or adopting new customs and cultures of a new society to be very difficult. The Iranian teenagers and young adults' first priority was attaining the best education possible in the American academic system to grow distinctively in their new home. Aiming for the highest degrees and professions by attaining bachelors, masters, Ph.D.s, M.D.s, and J.D.s, after 25 years of hard work, the Iranian exiles rank among the highest in the minority groups currently living in the United States, especially in California. According to a University of Arizona doctoral dissertation, the majority of the California-based population of Iranians is concentrated in 15 zip codes within Los Angeles County. In 1993, their average per

capita income was twice that of the national average and two times that of the county average.

On graduating from universities, professional schools, and institutions, these Iranian youth persevered to reach the highest professional ladders that the state of California would allow. The young Iranian immigrants of the 1980s currently hold the highest posts in the California state government. The success of the Iranian émigré has been noticeable on the technological frontier as well; they have taken part in the great technological revolution of the 1980s and 1990s and have benefited handsomely from its financial rewards. Silicon Valley, which by all measures and standards has been held as one of the top technological centers in the world, has seen the growth of many Iranian engineers who made their journey to the West because of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988).

West Los Angeles specifically has become the nucleus of the Iranian community as far as businesses and community activities are concerned. Although most of the Iranians live in and around Los Angeles County, Westwood Village has unofficially been called TehrAngeles, which is a combination of the name of the Iranian capital Tehran and Los Angeles. An estimated 70 percent of businesses in Westwood are Iranian owned. Persian was the most widely spoken language in Beverly Hills High School during the 1990s, even before the official language of English.

Believing in family as the most important part of society and also esteeming it as the most necessary part of a healthy and stable community, the Iranian youth strove to create a social setting that family, friends, and associates would enjoy and benefit from. Hence a large number of these Iranian youths who had begun to put down roots in California started the long process of petitioning for immigrant visas from the Department of State for their immediate families and relatives, which subsequently raised the number of Iranians living in California by tens of thousands. This specific characteristic of Iranian émigrés, it can be argued, allowed them to live and work side by side with the Mexican and Latin American population of California. The similarity of Mexican American and Iranian family and social values has created a symbiotic relationship to which the success of the Iranian immigrants in the greater Los Angeles area can be attributed. The inclusion of family elders, such as grandparents and great-grandparents, as part of the family and the utter and unconditional respect for them by all family members is another point of similarity between the Spanish-speaking population of California and Iranians, causing a more stable and successful existence in the West. In a more detailed analysis, one can take into account the role of food, music, and a festive lifestyle that has allowed Iranian immigrants to succeed in having a healthy relationship with all California residents in the 1980s, 1990s, and the opening years of the new millennium.

The Iranian youth in exile have not participated much in the political fight against the Islamic government of Iran for the past 25 years. This can be attributed to their dedication of time and energy to education, business, and commerce. Among the different businesses that these youths have been involved in was the burgeoning business of Persian music and entertainment. Although many believe that the effect of Persian music and its products has been nothing but a total disappointment musically and professionally, nevertheless this highly lucrative business has given birth to a new wave of Iranian youth, the children of the escapees of the Iranian war. Still, it is no match for the traditional and mainstream Hollywood entertainment machine.

The young immigrants of 20 years ago and their families have and are growing every year and are becoming a part of the vast western fabric of America that has made California a special place for those who seek opportunity, safety, and freedom.

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