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FRANCE XVII. PERSIAN COMMUNITY IN FRANCE

FRANCE

xvii. Persian Community in France

The emergence of a Persian community in France can perhaps be traced back to 1272/1855-6, when Farrok Khan Ḡaffārī, Amīn-al-Molk, later Amīn-al-Dawla (q.v.) was sent to Paris as the shah's envoy *(īlcī-e kabīr).* During his embassy, a group of forty-two Persian students, who became known as *les enfants de Perse* (Thieury, p. 39) and who were chosen mostly from the graduates of the recently founded Dar al-fonūn (q.v.), were sent to France. Meanwhile, in the course of the latter part of the 19th century, the Persian upper classes gradually began to send their sons to Europe and especially to France to pursue higher studies (Maḥbūbi, *Moʾassasāt* I, pp. 320-39).

According to accounts given by travelers, such as Ḥājī Sayyāḥ (Sayyāḥ Maḥallātī, pp. 134-254) and Ḥājī Pīrzāda (I, pp. 183-290), by the late 19th century, a Persian community of students, intellectuals, and diplomats was aiready established in Paris. These intellectuals played a prominent role in conveying liberal ideas of the Enlightenment and concepts associated with the French Revolution to Persia and participated in laying down the theoretical groundwork for the Constitutional Revolution. While in Paris, Mīrzā Yūsof Khan Mostašār-al-Dawla wrote, in 1287/1870-71, the influential pamphlet, *Yak*

kalama (One word), a free adaptation of the French Constitution (Āryanpūr, *Az Ṣabā ta Nīmā* I, p. 282); and Malkom Khan, who had been sent to France as a child and graduated from the Polytechnic in Paris (Balay, p. 23). was influenced by Auguste Comte's positivism, traceable in his later polemical work. Sayyed Jamāl-al-Dīn Asadābādī, known as "Afganī" (q.v.), the religions reformist, was received in Paris as a prominent personage in 1883. He wrote several articles in Arabic and French journals on the necessity of reform in Islam and the pernicious influence of Western imperialism on Oriental countries (Pakdaman, p. 77). In collaboration with his Egyptian disciple Moḥammad ʿAbdoh, he also published a journal in Paris called *al-ʿOrwa al-woṯqā.* It is in this short-lived newspaper, which was published for less than a year in 1884, that his pan-Islamic aspirations first appeared in print (Mirad, p. 110).

Towards the end of the 19th century. the Persian community in France was enlarged by the arrivai of politicians and intellectuals opposed to the despotic regime of Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah. Small in number, but containing some important personalities, this community provided a ready forum for political activists. A second wave arrived in 1326/1908 when Moḥammad ʿAlī Shah's coup against the constitutional government (the *estebdād-e ṣaḡīr;* see constitutional revolution ii) forced many men of letters and politicians to flee abroad. The majority settled in Paris and included the eminent Persian scholar Moḥammad Qazvini as well as Ḵalil Khan Ṯaqafī Aʿlam-al-Dawla, who had been Moẓaffar-al-Dīn Shah's physician. The latter was responsible for the formation of a group of political activists *{anjoman-e Irān-e javān)* who distributed propaganda against Moḥammad-ʿAlī Shah's regime and established contacts with the famous socialist and editor Jean Jaurès, whose articles against despotism in Persia appeared in his newspaper *L'Humanité* (Ṯaqafī Eʿzāz, pp. 28-29).

The continuing social and political turmoil in Persia in the first decades of this century led to further enlargement of the community. From 1912-14, the newspaper *Irānšahr* was published in Paris by Ebrāhīm Pur-e Dāwūd. The avowed aim, as stated in the first issue, was "to found a journal of information for compatriots living in Persia." Before the publication of the journal, meetings were organized in which French and Persian scholars gave lectures on different topics relating to Persian culture. This initiative gave them the opportunity to attract the attention of Europeans to Persia and its problems (Ṣadr Ḥāsemī, *Jarāʾed o majallāt,* no. 253; Parvīn, pp. 103-16). There is no

evidence to suggest that the more widely-known periodical, aiso called *Irānšahr*, which began its publication in Berlin in 1922 (Ṣadr Ḥāsemī, *Jarāʾed o majallāt,* no. 252) was a continuation of the Paris journal.

In 1925 Aḥmad Shah, aiready in *de facto* exile in France, was officially deposed. He soon fell ill and was hospitalized from 1928 in the Parisian suburb of Neuilly until his death in 1930. At this time, his mother, Malaka-ye Jahān settled in Saint-Cloud near Paris with her entourage and family members (Kadjar, pp. 328-29). Thus, the Qajar court joined the Persian community

in France, where many of their descendants réside to this day (Kadjar, pp. 328-31).

In 1928, during Reżā Shah's reign, a parliamentary law provided for govemment scholarships abroad for at least a hundred students (see education xxi). The candidates came from different social backgrounds and were selected on grounds of academic merit. Many studied in French universities, as well as in the prestigieux Grandes Écoles and the St. Cyr military school. During the 1930s until the outbreak of Worid War II, the number of Persians visiting Europe continued to increase, and France was the main center of attraction for tourists, merchants, and students.

In the course of the next forty years, during which Persian students were trained in France, the great majority returned home, and many became leading figures in Persia. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, a group of students became actively involved in political movements opposed to the Persian government. Eventually their activities led, in 1961, to the formation of the Confederation of Iranian Students: National Union (q.v.). Their meetings and publications had a strong impact both on international public opinion and on the educated younger generation at home. In spite of some internai quarrels, their perseverance in opposition was a contributory factor in shaping the events whieh led to the 1979 Revolution.

In October l978, France authorized Ayatollah Khomeini (Rūḥ-Allāh Ḵomeynī) to take up residence in the Paris suburb of Neuphle-le-Château. There he was received and acclaimed by both the French and international media, as well as by Persian opposition groups in Europe.

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Bahman 1357 Š./February 1979, hundreds of thousands of Persians have left their

homeland—the most important exodus in the history of Persia (see diaspora viii). Among the post-revolutionary emigrants, oniy a small percentage has gone to France, but their importance far exceeds their number, owing to the high percentage of intellectuals and politicians among them; and Paris has been host to almost ail Persian opposition leaders in the post-revolutionary era.

Persian immigrants in France can be classified on the basis of their political, socio-cultural, religions, and individual situations. Political immigrants include the ruling classes of the former regime, joined later by the revolutionary intelligentsia rejected by the Islamic government. Socio-cultural immigrants include those who, although not politically active, chose to leave the country because of their anxieties or dissatisfaction with the new policies of the government on education and the restrictions imposed on women.

In 1978 the number of Persians in France, according to the statistics of the Ministry of the Interior, was 5,941, mainly consisting of students. In 1979 their number doubled with the arrivai of the first group of post-revolutionary immigrants. Subsequent events, such as the Iran-Iraq War, the exile in July 1981 of President Abu'l-Ḥasan Banī-Ṣadr and Masʿūd Rajavī, the leader of the Mojāhedīn-e ḵalq, to France, and finally the banning of Tudeh party in February 1983, gradually increased the number of immigrants and refugees. But the total number has never exceeded 30.000. The French national census in 1982 put the number of Persians in that country at 6,000, a lower figure than that given by the French Ministry of the Interior. This discrepancy may be due, perhaps, to figures relating to those Persians who have a French residency permit *(carte de séjour)* but usually reside in Persia.

Since 1990 the Persian community in France has been declining in numbers. The causes may be related partly to the economic recession in France and partly to the policy of the Islamic govemment in encouraging Persians with professional skills to retum home. Another possible reason is the return of parents to Persia, especially single parents, who had only left home to be with their chiidren and see them through their education abroad. The acquisition of French nationality may be another factor.

The Persian immigrants are concentrated in a few areas: half of the Persian immigrants live in Paris, the rest being dispersed mainly on the French Riviera, Montpellier, Grenoble, and Aix-en-Provence.

In 1986 a survey was conducted on various aspects relating to the Persian immigrants in Paris (Nassehi-Behnam, 1989; 1990; 1991) focusing on demography, living conditions, family relations, problems, and aspirations. The results showed that 63 percent were ordinary residents with Persian passports, 27 percent political refugees, 3.5 percent holders of ordinary resident permits and French travel documents (mostly political personalities who did not wish to be considered as refugees), and 4.5 percent had acquired French nationality. The reasons for emigration were: 30 percent political, 37 percent socio-cultural, 13 percent economic (loss of employment), and the remainder a combination of the three factors. The choice of France was attributed by almost 50 percent to their affinity with France, 22 percent to visa and political refugee facilities, and the remainder to factors such as the presence of their family members and the opposition movements, or the possibility of receiving temporary residency.

Persians have settled in various parts of Paris according to their means. The Tower Blocks of the 15th arrondissement, often referred to jokingly by Persians as “Téhéran-sur-Seine,” contain a well-known concentration of Persians, and provide a focus for communal gatherings. There are shops owned and managed by educated, upper class ex-diplomats, engineers. architects, and administrators, who find moral support in this ethnie setting where their former status is recognized and acknowledged by their clients.

Socio-demographic situation. The Persian household rarely exceed four persons in Paris. Larger families usually live in the suburbs, where rents are cheaper. The structure of the household shows that immigration has been most of ail on a family basis. Nearly half of them consist of nuclear families (38 percent with, and 9.5 percent without, chiidren), 37 percent can be considered as separated families, including divorced or widowed individuals or single-parent families. In the last category (17.5 percent) are mostly women who live with their chiidren in Paris, having left their husbands in Persia or eisewhere for political or economic reasons. The remainder are celibates or nuclear families with relatives (such as parents, sisters, brothers, cousins).

A distinctive feature of the community is the high-level of education of its members: 78.5 percent have at least one university degree. Prominent among them are many skilled experts and specialists in various scientific and technical areas who had formerly held key posts. In Paris, however, statistics point to a high level of unemployment among Persian immigrants (46 percent) and to the inability of many highiy qualified immigrants to find suitable jobs.

The gender ratio in the working groups is about equal, despite the lower professional qualifications of women, who, in comparison with their pre-emigration position, are more active than men. Having family responsibilities as head of the household and being the breadwinner or sharing the status of breadwinner have contributed to female emancipation and upward mobility in family status while living abroad (Mansur, 1992; Nassehi-Behnam, 1994, 1998).

Another problem confronting the parents is the education of their chiidren. Wishing to preserve their cultural roots while facing the need for integration, they are often caught in the dilemma of either allowing their children to be absorbed in the French educational and cultural system or placing strong pressure on them to retain their native language and identity. Attempts at a harmonious synthesis between the cultures are not aiways successful. The results of a study among the younger generation of immigrants reveals that, as expected, they are more adaptable and malleable towards bi-cultural attitudes (Allami-Saraskanrood, p. 282), while the fear of deculturation and loss of ethnic identity is far more strongly feit among the older generation, many of whom, particularly the political refugees, persevere in regarding their stay abroad as a mere sojourn, before an eventual return home.

Cultural activities. During the first years of the exodus, the Persian community on the whole withdrew into itself, due to post-revolutionary trauma and political disputes. Since the mid-1980s, the desire to maintain and partake in their ethnic identity has encouraged them to develop cultural associations. To promote and disseminate Persian culture, they have organized concerts, conferences, exhibitions, and film shows; some have added mutual help services and Persian language classes for children. In Paris there are at least ten active associations of this kind; similar associations aiso exist in other French cities with sizable Persian communities.

A new phenomenon in the Persian community is the attraction to Sufi brotherhoods established outside Persia, especially after the Revolution. Their gatherings provide solace for some immigrants in a Persian atmosphere with common, non-political, interests. At present, there are three main spiritual groups active in Paris and a few other cities. These include the followers of Rāh-e kamāl (the Path of Perfection) whose spiritual master, Bahrām Elāhī, resides in Paris; the followers of Ṭarīqat-e Owaysī (the Owaysi Order), whose spiritual master Nāder ʿAnqā lives in Califomia; and a branch of the Neʿmat-Allāhīya, following Dr. Jawād Nūrbaḵš, who llves in London. Although most

members of these groups are Persian, they have aiso attracted increasingly large numbers of non-Persians to their meetings.

More than forty periodicals have been published in France during the last décade (Mahvi Foundation, 1986; and Iranian Center for Documentation and Research, 1989), of which twenty-six can be considered as political, thirteen cultural, and the remainder of general interest. Political periodicals are published by various groups, but many have been forced to suspend publication due to financial difficulties or political disagreements. The most important cultural and academic periodicals in Paris are *Ruzegār-e now,* edited by Esmāʿīl Pūrwālī, a professional journalist. and *Češmandāz,* edited by Nāṣer Pākdāman and Moḥsen Yalfānī. Two other noteworthy joumals, *Dabīra*, edited by Homā Nāteq, and *Aḵtar,* edited by ʿAbdī Aḥmadī and Bīžan Ḥekmat, have ceased publication.

Political activities. Most Persian opposition leaders reside in Paris. In the period 1979-96, five of them were assassinated, including the last shah's nephew, Šahrīār Safīq (7 December 1979), and the last prime minister before the revolution, Šāpūr Baḵtīār (6 August 1991). Nevertheless, numerous groups, ranging from the extreme left to extreme right, have been active, creating a highiy politicized atmosphere that involves most Persians in political issues and induces dissension even within families. The best-known and well-organized among them has been the Iranian National Resistance Movement (Nahżat-e moqāwemat-e mellī-e Irān). formed in March 1980 by Šāpūr Baḵtīār. Its members included both constitutional monarchists and liberal republicans. Since the assassination of Baḵtīār, their activities have diminished, and one of their newspapers, *Rūz-nāma-ye Nahżat,* has ceased publication, while their other journal, *Qīām-e Irān,* is published intermittently.

A constitutional-monarchist organization, the Front for the Liberation of Iran (Jabha-ye najāt-e Irān,) was founded in January 1981 by ʿAlī Amīnī (1907-92), a former prime minister. It published a monthly review, *Irān wa jahān* and the journal *Nahzat-e Iran.* Il has undergone several internai changes: it was renamed Sāzmân-e derafs-e kāvīânī in 1986 under the leadership ofManūcehr Ganji. In 1992, it once again adopted a new name, the Organization for Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms for Iran (Sāzmān-e ḥoqūq-e bašar wa āzādīhā-ye asāsī barā-ye Irān). Since then, it has published several free newsletters. A third organization is the National Resistance Council (Šūra-ye melli-e moqāwemat), founded in July 1981 by former President Abu'l-Ḥasan Bani-Ṣadr and Masʿūd Rajavī with the aim of establishing a Democratie Islamic

Republic. This council has served as the front organization for the Mojāhedin-e ḵalq. Their publications in France include a periodical called *Šūrā-ye moqāwemat* and the weekiy *Mojāhed.* Later, in 1984, Banī-Ṣadr left the Mojāhedīn and launched the newspaper *Enqelâb-e eslāmī* (q.v.).

The Iranian left in France aiso consists of the Democratie Party of Iranian Kurdistan, the Fedāʾīān-e ḵalq, and the Tudeh party, its splinter groups, and activists. The Fedāʾīān have aiso split into numerous groups. A dissident group from the Tudeh party, led by Bābak Amīr-Ḵosravī and former army ofncer Ferīdūn Āzarnūr. both exiles in France since 1983, have founded the Democratie Party of the People of Iran, with a monthly review called *Rāh-e āzādi.*

This list is by no means exhaustive, as there are numerous Persian opposition groups in France, both of the left and the right, as well as humanitarian associations, such as the League for the Defense of Human Rights in Iran founded in 1980 by former leading activists of the Confederation of Iranian Students: National Union, presided over by Karīm Lahījī since 1983.

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