



GREAT BRITAIN XI. THE PERSIAN COMMUNITY IN BRITAIN (1)

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This entry will be treated in two separate articles:

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PERSIAN COMMUNITY

This article focuses particularly on the varying circumstances which led the Persian community in Britain to leave Persia, the continuing relationship between the Persian diaspora and Persia, and the way in which these factors have in turn affected their social and economic insertion into British society. There has been very little research that has focused on the characteristics of the Persians living in Britain and the problems they have faced in the process of migration. The invisibility of Persians in Britain could be due to a number of reasons, including their relatively small number compared to other emigrant groups, the fact that they do not reside in concentrated areas like many other



such groups, and because they do not pose social problems for British society.

General population characteristics. Persian emigration to Britain began in the 1950s and consisted mainly of students holding temporary visas from middle to upper class families who were sent overseas for higher education. The majority of Persians living in Britain left Persia due to the events surrounding the Revolution of 1978-1979 and its aftermath. The 1981 population census found a total of 28,617 Persians who were born in Persia living in Britain, with 18,132 males and 10,485 females living in London and 3,295 males and 2,683 females living outside of London (OPCS/GRO(S), 1983). Between 1979 and 1984, an estimated 8,000 Persians arrived in Britain, generating the largest percentage of asylum seekers in the country. The 1991 census indicated that there were 32,262 Persians who were born in Persia who were resident in Britain, 16,856 of whom were living in inner and outer London. The figures listed above do not include the children born to Persian parents, nor those whose immigration status is unclear. The 1991 census, which was the first to include a question on ethnic groups, classified Persians in the Other-Other ethnic category, a residual category made up of 290,000 people (0.5 per cent of the population in Britain) from a number of ethnic groups. Persians cannot be independently distinguished in the census classification, but with the North Africans and Arabs they make up 22.5 per cent (58,720) of the Other-Other category (OPCS/GRO(s), 1993). According to the Persian consulate in London there are approximately 75,000 Persians living in Britain, half of whom live in the London area. They also reported that around 35,000 Persians are registered at the consulate (Interview, Iranian consulate, 12 December, 1999).

The 1979 Revolution and the waves of migration. Persians living in Britain are from a range of political, socio-economic, religious and ethnic backgrounds. In order to shed light on the settlement experience of this heterogeneous group, it is necessary to refer briefly to the relationship between the series of power struggles leading up to the establishment of the Islamic Republic and the waves of Persians who came to Britain. The first movement of Persians arrived around the time Moḥammed Reżā Shah was overthrown in February 1979, and consisted mainly of families who had benefited from the socio-economic developments of the Pahlavi era and their political positioning at that time. Many were already fluent in English and familiar with the London lifestyle and reside in affluent boroughs of London, such as Kensington and Chelsea, Knightsbridge, Richmond, Hampstead, Swiss Cottage and the City of Westminster.



After two years of revolutionary transition, Ayatollah Khomeini and Islamic forces eradicated internal political opposition and dominated the revolutionary process and its outcome. The threats and repression used to control the revolutionary forces, along with the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war led to the second wave of emigration containing members of ethnic and religious groups, political activists from various affiliations, families fearing the military draft, intellectuals, skilled professionals and many others who opposed the government's anti-secular policies. Those seeking asylum and settlement in Britain were not as affluent as the early waves, and live dispersed in urban areas from London to Leeds, mainly in inner and outer west London and the West Midlands (Peach, p. 96). They were followed by an unsteady stream from the urban working classes and religious minority groups seeking relief from declining economic conditions and religious discrimination and persecution in Persia throughout the 1980s.

Initial transition. Most Persians did not plan on living in Britain permanently. Many reported that, when they first arrived, they followed closely the news and events in Persia and waited for the political scene to change so they could return to their homeland. The consolidation of the Islamic government, the Iran-Iraq war, and the continued political and religious persecution in Persia all contributed to the realization that their stay was not temporary. The family unit and sub-groupings based on politics, ethnicity and religion have been the primary bases that have furnished a sense of belonging for Persians in Britain, thus facilitating the adjustment process. A few Persian community centers and religious and ethnic organizations were developed in the mid-1980s to inform Persians of their rights in Britain and offer advice on immigration, welfare, housing and other issues involved in the process of resettlement. It is important to add that Britain has often been described as a transitory destination for those waiting to obtain visas to enter the United States.

Social and economic integration. Their continued absence from Persia and the resilience of the Persian government after Khomeini's death in 1989 furthered the shift in self perception from being sojourners to settlers. It should be noted that in 1991, the then president of Persia, 'Ali-Akbar Hāšemi Rafsanjāni, extended an invitation to the exiles to return to Persia ("Come Home, Almost all is forgiven," *The Economist*, 2 May 1992, p. 51). While a few returned or traveled back and forth between Britain and Persia, many did not believe it was safe to return or found they were not willing to live in the restricted political and social climate of Persia. Others said they wished to stay in Britain



so that their children could benefit from the British education system.

The economic and social transition of Persians to British society depends on many factors, including age, gender, proficiency of the English language, religion, ethnicity, occupational and educational backgrounds. There is a need for future studies to evaluate the economic integration of Persians, taking gender and the heterogeneity of the group into consideration. While many Persians have become self-employed, owning and working in businesses such as restaurants, grocery stores, laundrettes and taxi companies, others have professional and skilled jobs in various fields, including engineering, accounting, and computing and technical areas (Harbottle, pp. 89-97). Many Persians reported, however, that they have had difficulties in finding jobs that match their educational and occupational experience and qualifications. Some Persians, particularly non-professionals, said they had faced discrimination in Britain and had to change their name to a Western name in order to get a job. Some members of religious and ethnic subgroups, including the Bahais, Zoroastrians, Jews, Armenians, and Assyrians said that they had help finding jobs from contacts in religious and ethnic organizations.

Although it has been very important for Persians to adapt successfully to British society, many have feared losing their sense of being Persian and have made great efforts in maintaining Persian cultural forms and the Persian language. A growing number of Persian educational and socio-cultural venues developed throughout the 1980s, including Persian language schools (such as Rostam School located in North West London and Kānun-e Iran in Central London), religious associations and gatherings, cultural celebrations (particularly for the Persian New Year), Persian restaurants, poetry readings, contemporary and classical Persian music concerts, films, comedy shows and discos. There are a range of Persian newspapers, magazines and journals printed in Persian in Britain, such as *Nimruz*, *Kayhān*, *Aṣḡar Āqā*, and the advertising free paper, *Niāzmandihā*. These, along with a number of other Persian newspapers and periodicals printed both inside and outside of Persia, are held at the library for Iranian studies, located in West London. A number of charity organizations are active in Britain, such as the Persian Heritage Foundation (which offers of support for projects on Persian history, language and culture) and the Kahrizak charity (which collects funds for the Kahrizak Sanatorium for the disabled and the elderly in Persia). Persian news groups and chat lines on the Internet have also become a forum for communication and identity construction. It is important to add that popular cultural events



are blurring the internal divisions among Persians, particularly among the second generation.

Although the way in which Persian identity is expressed through the media and cultural forms depends on its diverse backgrounds, there has been a tendency for Persians to draw on positive representations of Persian heritage in order to transcend the Islamic politics in Persia and negative sentiments towards Persians and Muslims in Britain. As similar research conducted in the United States testifies, many Persians have promoted various brands of Persian nationalism by identifying with the pre-Islamic past and various periods in the pre-revolution times (Naficy, pp. 57-59). Reverting to an ideal religious past is also a pattern that emerged in some Persian organizations.

The 1997 presidential election. Moḥammad Kātami's victory at the 1997 Presidential elections and his program of moderation and reform, which has led to an upgrade in diplomatic relations between Britain and Persia, has created a new political context for Persians living in Britain to reconsider or reconfirm their positions towards the Persian government (Richard Cornwall, "Britain names Ambassador to Tehran," *The Independent*, 5 May 1999, p. 8). This has led to a restructuring of old political divisions, with some Persians warming up to Kātami and his reforms, while others remain skeptical about the sincerity of the regime, refusing to cooperate until it becomes fully democratic and observant of human rights. Kātami has created a new section in the government attending to the cultural affairs of Persians abroad and has implemented a number of new policies designed to attract Persians back to Persia (Interview, Iranian Consulate). Although there has been a large increase of Persians who travel back and forth between Persia and Britain, whether or not Persians decide to resettle in Persia is a matter for future research projects (Interview, Iranian consulate).

Conclusions. Due to the circumstances of Persian migration and their backgrounds this group cannot easily be compared to other contemporary emigrant groups in Britain. Over the last twenty years the settlement experience of Persians in Britain has been continually informed and structured by the political situation in Persia. Their presence in Britain, which was thought to be temporary, was extended due to the establishment of the Islamic Regime, the Iran/Iraq war and the unchanging political situation in Persia after Khomeini's death in 1989. Although the adaptation of Persians in Britain vary among the different internal sub-groups, they have generally shown positive signs of economic and social integration, while interacting



among themselves in an informal context that emphasizes the Persian language and various Persian values and traditions. Kātami's presidential victory and his political platform of moderation and reform, along with social factors, including Persia's impressive wins in the 1998 world cup and the success of Persian film-makers have all contributed to a new conjuncture for Persians to negotiate their identities in the British context.

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