



Othering Iran:

How Dehumanization of Iranians Undermines
Rights at Home



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Introduction

While negative attitudes toward Iran and Iranians are commonplace in the language of U.S. politicians, popular culture and news media, little attention has been given to how this routine prejudice plays a role in U.S. policies. Since these attitudes have come to inform U.S. policies, this report examines the real-life impact on policy positions, from foreign and immigration policies, to the domestic hurdles that Iranian Americans face.

Though the U.S. has had a problem with institutional racism since its inception, especially impacting Black Americans, much work has been done to challenge and address the devastation caused domestically for Americans of different backgrounds and marginalized groups. Led by Black Americans, many disenfranchised peoples benefitted from the Civil Rights Movement, yet this struggle for true equality persists to this day.

Acknowledging the roots of racism and its pervasive influence on contemporary America has been critical to efforts at educating the public, calling for policy changes, and holding our elected officials accountable. Though there is still much work to be done, there is some hope in the fact that the discussion of racism in America is active and widespread.

Less recognized is the role of prejudice and racist tropes in our foreign policy. At the heart of addressing unpopular foreign policies that have maintained endless wars, inflated military budgets, unjust immigration policies, and devastated millions of people globally, is the dehumanization of peoples across the world. One such group is Iranians.

The systematic demonization of Iran, and by extension Iranian people and those of Iranian heritage, is so prevalent in U.S. political discourse that it permeates American society and popular culture as well. This process has not only led to the dehumanization of an entire group of people, but it also informs U.S. policy positions on Iran.

As such, U.S. policy on Iran has often been guided by an anti-Iranian attitude that actually works to undermine U.S. national security and global security interests. It is important to note that both the U.S. and Iranian governments have acted to fuel the tensions that lead to the demonization of Iranians across the board and the erosion of civil liberties here in the United States. Thus, Iranian Americans face discrimination and alienation at home in the United States, where they have the right and ability to challenge such policies as Americans. They are affected by policies that adversely impact them, an environment that vilifies them for their country of heritage, and anxiety over the welfare of their loved ones in Iran.

The real-life consequences of these policies are evident in the discriminatory closures of Iranian-American bank accounts, the freezing of transactional accounts simply for using words like “Iran” or “Persian,” immigration policies that prevent family members from Iran to visit their Iranian-American family, discriminatory questions when entering the United States as a U.S. person, and an overall sense of hostility that has been experienced in numerous ways. Additionally, the collective punishment of sanctions and fear of possible war with Iran impacts Iranian Americans by hurting their families who still reside in Iran.

The intention of this report is to provide an overview of the history of U.S.-Iran relations—especially the historical backdrop of their mutual grievances and ongoing hostilities—as well as a historical picture of the U.S. narrative on Iran, which has been shaped over the last four decades with the consistent demonization of Iran and, as a result, Iranians themselves.

Drawing from primary sources as well as personal testimonies from the Iranian-American community, this report collects these sources in one place to understand the weight and ubiquity of harmful discourse on Iran, as well as looking at how it has impacted the community.

Finally, the report will provide policy recommendations to address how to improve the current situation, ensure equal treatment for Iranian Americans in the United States, and enact policies based on facts on the ground rather than zealous hostility. The need to reevaluate our Iran policy is evident in the fact that it has left its claimed targets in the Islamic Republic relatively unscathed, and has instead predominantly hurt ordinary Iranian people, as well as Iranian Americans.

Even with a short-lived détente between the U.S. and Iran in the wake of the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal, the last four decades have been marked by hostilities between these two states. However, the longer history of U.S.-Iran relations, and the landmark deal itself, demonstrates our capacity for peaceful relations and refutes the idea that we are fated for conflict. But in order to address these policies, we must first acknowledge the prejudiced view that has colored our understanding, demonized an entire country and its people, and caused unjust harm to Americans of Iranian heritage.



Background

This section of the report explores the history of U.S.-Iran relations and their respective grievances, the systematic demonization of Iran and Iranians in U.S. political discourse and popular culture, and the personal stories of Iranian Americans who have faced discrimination at home in the United States.

A History Revisited: U.S.-Iran Relations

Despite the contemporary hostility that is plainly exhibited by both the United States and Iran towards each other, these two nations share a longer, more complex history. There is a temptation from both sides to begin this historical narrative at key dates that correspond with their mutual grievances.

For the U.S., and many Americans, the history of U.S.-Iran relations begins in 1979, with images of Iran's revolution that toppled its monarchy and established the Islamic Republic. But it is the images of 52 Americans taken hostage on November 4th, 1979 by Iranian students and revolutionaries, which was seared into the minds of Americans and has shaped the way Iran is viewed in the United States to this day. Ironically, the historical sin that shaped the contemporary view of the U.S. for many Iranians is central to understanding the U.S. embassy seizure of 1979.

For Iranians, the coup of 1953—which ousted their popular Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq and reinstalled a despotic king—shaped not only their views of the U.S., but also the nature of their country and its entire political and historical trajectory. The significance of the coup is often diminished in the American discourse on Iran, while hawkish voices that push regime change have tried to rewrite this history in service of their political aspirations. However, recognizing the importance of this event helps to understand the events of 1979, the hostage crisis, and the historical roots of animosity between these two states.

But before examining those roots, it is also crucial to recognize that the start of U.S.-Iran relations was neither 1979, nor was it 1953. John Ghazvinian's recent study on the history of America and Iran¹ over the last three centuries explores the many positive interactions between Iran and the U.S. and lays out a picture that contradicts the idea that these two nations are destined for conflict.

¹ Ghazvinian, John H. *America and Iran: A History, 1720 to the Present*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021.

Looking at the daily rhetoric from U.S. politicians and the media coverage of Iran, it may be hard to believe that these countries once shared friendly relations and a mutual admiration. In the early 20th century, as Iranians—like many people across the world—fought for their independence from foreign powers and for a government that was accountable to its people, the U.S. was esteemed for its non-interference in Iranian affairs. Though Iran was never formally colonized, in the 19th and early 20th century it was caught in the “Great Game,” a political confrontation in which the British and Russian empires vied for influence and domination. The U.S. was seen as a revolutionary state that was reluctant to get involved in European imperialism.

In fact, a number of Americans in the first half of the 20th century became iconic figures in the Iranian psyche. In 1909, an American Presbyterian missionary named Howard Baskerville was killed in Iran fighting on the side of Iranian constitutionalists. Having died at the age of 24, as a revolutionary activist supporting the struggle of Iranians for liberty, Baskerville was remembered as a martyr and deeply respected by Iranian people.

In 1911, an American banker, Morgan Shuster, was invited to Iran to help reorganize the country’s financial system. He quickly grew frustrated by Russian interference and helped push for Iranian independence. As Ghazvinian explains, “To the thousands of ordinary Persians who had supported the struggle for democracy, Morgan Shuster became a national hero—a resolute defender of Persia’s independence against the arrogance of foreign imperialism.”²

Yet another celebrated American in Iran during this era was Samuel M. Jordan, a Presbyterian missionary who became known for his contributions to Iran’s modern education system and was the founder and president of the Alborz College of Tehran for over 40 years. A main boulevard in Tehran was named after Jordan before the revolution of 1979. While street names were changed after the revolution and adopted by Iranian people, this main street is still widely referred to as “Jordan.”

As these cases show, Iranian attitudes toward the United States and Americans was quite positive and distinct from their views of European imperialists. Unfortunately, this image was upended in 1953 when the U.S. played a central role in ousting Iran’s PM Mossadeq and reinstated the Shah, who unleashed a brutal crackdown on dissent in the wake of the coup.

To understand the impact of the coup, we must recall the struggle of the Iranian people for both democracy and independence from foreign powers. No national figure embodied the convergence of these ideas like Mohammad Mossadeq. His mass popularity stemmed from his campaign to nationalize Iran’s oil for the benefit of the Iranian nation and to take on a formidable empire in the United Kingdom, which had controlled most of Iran’s oil

2. Ibid. Pg. 73.

resources and revenues for decades. As Iran's Prime Minister, Mossadeq represented the idea of democratic institutions. As the distinguished historian, Ervand Abrahamian, aptly describes, "Mossadeq—the champion of oil nationalization—was well placed to emerge in the turbulent years of World War II as the icon of Iranian nationalism."³

In the aftermath of World War II, the notion of an international community pledged a new world order with self-determination and sovereignty for all peoples of the world, as well as international law and protections. Thus, in the context of 20th century anti-colonial movements that sought to realize these promises, Mossadeq utilized the new tools of internationalism to nationalize Iran's oil and fulfill the hopes of independence. Despite these promises of sovereignty and the new rules-based world order that the U.S. espoused, the CIA played a decisive role—along with the United Kingdom who saw the Prime Minister as a threat to its control over Iranian oil—in ousting Mossadeq.

The fact that the Shah was reinstalled by foreign powers had a lasting influence on how Iranians viewed the monarchy, a point that Iranian revolutionaries capitalized on to galvanize the masses during the decades of resistance that led to the 1979 revolution. But the trauma of the coup came full circle in October of 1979 when then-President Carter allowed the deposed Shah of Iran to enter the United States for medical treatment. Fearing another plot to bring the Shah back to power, as the U.S. had done in 1953, Iranian students stormed and seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran two weeks later.

Those privy to the history of the coup knew the danger of Carter's decision. As Ambassador John Limbert—one of the 52 American hostages held by Iranian students in 1979—explains, "When President Carter agreed to let the shah come to the United States, *he ignored history and the ghosts of 1953* [emphasis added], when Washington had helped topple a nationalist prime minister and returned the shah from abroad."⁴

The 444-day saga of the hostage crisis became a part of daily news and discussion in the U.S., as stories filled television screens and papers across the country. This barrage of negative images sparked bigotry against Iranian immigrants and Iranian Americans who endured open hatred and even physical assaults because of their Iranian heritage. In fact, many Iranians felt so threatened by the hostile atmosphere that they referred to themselves as "Persian" to avoid any links with Iran.⁵

President Carter's inability to free the hostages tarnished his presidential legacy and helped Ronald Reagan win the 1980 election. But the lasting impact of the episode was also seen in how deeply it affected the American psyche on Iran. Over 40 years later, President Trump invoked the memory of the crisis when he threatened to attack 52 cultural sites in Iran,⁶ one for each of the 52 hostages held in 1979.

3. Abrahamian, Ervand. *The Coup: 1953, The CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations*. New York: The New Press, 2013. Pg. 31.

4. John Limbert, "Events of four decades ago continue to cast their malevolent shadows over a relationship that should have long since become more productive," *American Foreign Service Association*, November, 2019, <https://afsa.org/lingering-poison-tehran-40-years-later-what-have-we-learned>.

5. "Untold America," <https://www.facebook.com/UntoldAmericaShow/videos/why-are-there-so-many-iranians-in-los-angeles/1871561272867349/>. Last accessed November 19, 2021.

6. Dennis Romero and Yuliya Talmazan, "Trump threatens attacks on 52 sites if Iran retaliates for Soleimani killing," *NBC News*, January 4, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/trump-threatens-iran-attacks-52-sites-n1110511>.

While both the U.S. and Iran have justifiable grievances from the past, those events do not have to define the relationship of these two states indefinitely. In fact, their continued animosity has been to the detriment of both nations, global security objectives, and Americans of Iranian heritage. U.S. policies vis-à-vis Iran have often been guided by ideological attitudes rather than shrewd strategy. This is in part true because for over four decades, U.S. political discourse, popular culture and media have systematically demonized Iran and Iranians in such a way that clouds our judgement of the facts on the ground. We turn now to a look at that decades-long process of dehumanization.

Demonizing Iran

Of course, it is impossible to separate the vilification of Iran from the larger demonization of the Muslim world that has been used for centuries to justify colonialism and the subjugation of these peoples by Western powers. Edward Said's ground-breaking scholarship on Orientalism helped to contextualize this history. By connecting the construction of the "other" as less than human to these brutal systems of exploitation, Said showed how the dehumanization of those who inevitably suffer under these policies is fundamental to such imperialist objectives. As Said argues, "Always there lurks the assumption that although the Western consumer belongs to a numerical minority, he is entitled either to own or to expend (or both) the majority of the world resources. Why? Because he, unlike the Oriental, is a true human being."⁷

Throughout the last four decades, U.S. politicians and media have so often discussed Iran in such undesirable terms that negative attitudes toward Iran and Iranians became common in U.S. popular culture as well. This deluge of negative imagery continues to this day.⁸

From the 1980s, with the hostage crisis still a recent event, depictions of Iranians focused on the affair as if it was emblematic of the culture and population at large. In a 1981 episode of the sketch-comedy series *Saturday Night Live (SNL)*, character actors play Iranian students from Tehran University that are shown celebrating their success taking hostages, and considering future kidnappings and international schemes. One revealing comment in the skit shows how Americans understood the hostage crisis, "The class of '81 just brought down *the strongest nation in the world* [emphasis added] to its knees."⁹ The U.S. embassy seizure was seen as a national embarrassment at the hands of a weaker foe.

This sentiment was expressed through a desire for revenge, as seen in another *SNL* skit from 1981, in which character actor Eddie Murphy claims financial grievances against Iran, saying an Iranian drug dealer had failed to deliver the promised Iranian hashish after being paid.¹⁰

7. Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 2004. Pg. 108.

8. The examples presented throughout this report are not a comprehensive list of such instances, however, they are meant to represent a broad trend of anti-Iranian attitudes that permeate American society.

9. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzagbF8gEoU>. Last accessed September 30, 2021.

10. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jzbsuBRB8A>. Last accessed September 30, 2021.

In a not-so-veiled reference to the hostage crisis, as retribution Murphy says, “so I took the dude hostage and ain’t givin’em back until Iran” returns his money and provides the drugs. The audience reaction of overexcited applause at the idea of taking an Iranian hostage is an indication of the lasting impact of the crisis and a longing to seek vengeance.

The hostage crisis became such a significant event in contemporary American history that it entered other forms of popular culture as well. The 1989 Parker Brothers party game, Taboo, also invoked the memory of the embassy seizure.¹¹ A word-guessing game, Taboo asks players to describe a word on a card until their team guesses what it is, but without using the “taboo” words listed on the same card. In the 1989 version of the game, one of the cards displayed the word “hostage” and listed “Iran” as part of the taboo words.

This theme of hostage taking continued into the 1990s and was depicted as part of Iranian *culture*, rather than a politically motivated action in the context of larger historical events. The 1991 film, *Not Without My Daughter*, tells the story of Betty Mahmoody, an American woman who married an Iranian man in the U.S. and was held against her will by her husband on a trip to Iran to visit his family. The film became an introduction to what they believed was Iranian society for many Americans, who lacked knowledge or other depictions of the country and its diverse population, culture and history.

One of the more glaring biases of the film is its depiction of Islam. Mahmoody’s Iranian husband is portrayed as a nice man in the U.S., however, upon his return to Iran his character flips completely and there is little room to mistake the intentional characterization of Islam and Iran as violent, extreme, and in stark contrast to what we deem as “Western” values of freedom and enlightenment. As the famed film-critic Roger Ebert wrote at the time:

“No attempt is made - deliberately, I assume - to explain the Muslim point of view, except in rigid sets of commands and rote statements. No Muslim character is painted in a favorable light... ‘Not Without My Daughter’ does not play fair with its Muslim characters. If a movie of such a vitriolic and spiteful nature were to be made in America about any other ethnic group, it would be denounced as racist and prejudiced.”¹²

Even with these clear prejudices, the film has been broadcast many times over the years—once infamously in Paris the night before the 1998 World Cup game between the U.S. and Iran¹³—and even shown in schools in the United States.

For Iranian Americans, the film is akin to a shared trauma for the community. Stories about how the film impacted them and how Iranians are portrayed in the United States is commonplace. In 2016, the film resurfaced in news stories due to the publication of

11. Assal Rad, “The Hostage Crisis is Damaging U.S.-Iran Relations Today. Yet Too Few Understand It,” *Newsweek*, November 4, 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/hostage-crisis-damaging-us-iran-relations-today-yet-too-few-understand-it-opinion-1469465>.

12. Roger Ebert, “Not Without My Daughter,” *RogerEbert.com*, January 11, 1991, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/not-without-my-daughter-1991>.

13. Amy Shipley and Anne Swardson, “Good Sports, Not Bad Blood, Spur U.S., Iranian Players,” *The Washington Post*, June 19, 1998, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/sports/1998/06/19/good-sports-not-bad-blood-spur-us-iranian-players/063de1b9-b5fc-443d-90db-e2b8c5c28f59/>.

Mahtob Mahmoody's memoir—the daughter and central subject of the film.¹⁴ In response, writer Gazelle Emami looked at the lasting legacy of the film for Iranian Americans and spoke with prominent members of the community who shared their rightful critiques of the film's prejudice. Emami aptly noted, "It bears repeating that the film is based on a woman's real-life experience, but the way it's told, the story of abuse is inextricable from Islam and race."¹⁵ 30 years after the film's release, it continues to haunt the Iranian-American community.

But negative depictions of Iran infused with racist themes were not always packaged in such obvious ways. More pernicious than the damaging portrayals of Iranians as central figures are the microaggressions of racist or prejudiced treatments found in various forms. Even in presumably innocuous spaces, like the well-known television sitcom *Friends*, stunningly bigoted comments on Iran happen with no outcry or concern from American audiences. In a 1997 episode of the series titled, "The One with the Ultimate Fighting Champion," Monica describes her boyfriend's ultimate fighting opponent with dread saying, "Apparently he trains by going to Iran and pulling the arms off thieves."¹⁶

The 2007 film, *300*, which aimed to retell the story of the Battle of Thermopylae in the Persian Wars received a strong response and rebuke from Iranians in Iran and the diaspora for its outlandish portrayals of Persians. In some cases the film goes so far as depicting them as non-human or alien, such as the executioner Xerxes summons who is a grossly distorted figure. In other ways the film played on the clichés of Orientalism by showing the Persians as oversexualized, weak and effeminate, yet simultaneously dangerous, oppressive and threatening. The juxtaposition with the Spartans—who were hypermasculine, honorable, and liberating—was not lost on audiences who saw the film as "a dangerous piece of fantasy,"¹⁷ which reflected racist-American attitudes toward Iran as an enemy and incited chauvinist sentiments and jingoism.¹⁸

Over the last decade, Hollywood depictions of Iran have often coincided with heightened tensions and political concerns between the U.S. and Iran. The 2011 blockbuster film, *Transformers 3*, was released at a time of increased belligerent language from the Obama administration, as it applied brutal sanctions on Iran to pressure the state over its nuclear program. In the film, the Autobots—which appear as a benevolent force of robotic lifeforms—assist the U.S. military "in solving human conflicts."¹⁹ One scene in the film shows the Autobots destroying a nuclear site in Iran that appears to be guarded by Iranian military personnel.

The fact that little context is provided suggests that the audience assumes Iran is inherently malign and therefore any attack is deemed just and heroic. This is not surprising

14. NPR, "'Not Without My Daughter' Subject Grows Up, Tells her Own Story," *NPR*, November 29, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/11/29/457756753/-not-without-my-daughter-subject-grows-up-tells-her-own-story>.

15. Gazelle Emami, "The *Not Without My Daughter* Problem: How a Sally Field Movie Became an Iranian-American Headache," *Vulture*, January 11, 2016, <https://www.vulture.com/2016/01/not-without-my-daughter-problem.html>.

16. <https://twitter.com/AssalRad/status/1310668374678990849?s=20>. Last accessed September 30, 2021.

17. Michael White, "300 is a Dangerous Piece of Fantasy," *The Guardian*, March 27, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2007mar/27/300isadangerouspieceoffa>.

18. Gary Leupp, "Historian Calls 300 a Racist and Insulting Film," *History News Network*, March 31, 2001, <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/37394>.

19. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cbtb5mak3_g. Last accessed October 1, 2021.

given the way U.S. officials boasted at the time about devastating Iran's economy with no regard to the human toll of these policies. President Obama in March of 2012 spoke of the impact of U.S. sanctions on Iran, stating that sanctions were, "virtually grinding the Iranian economy to a halt in 2011...And in 2012, the Iranian government faces the prospect of even more *crippling* [emphasis added] sanctions."²⁰ Absent from this assessment is how millions of innocent Iranians—with limited impact on their government's policies—suffered under the weight of those sanctions, as if their lives were of no consequence.

In 2013, as hopes for diplomacy emerged under the new engagement-friendly Rouhani administration in Iran, the problematic²¹ Showtime series *Homeland*—which was full of Islamophobic stereotypes and clichés—focused its third season on Iran. Before a deal had even been penned in real life, the series had Iran "violating"²² the agreement, painting Iran again as the archetypal villain to be crushed. Observers noted the monolithic and totally inaccurate representation of Iranian people in the show, supporting the idea of an anti-Iran bias. As author Michael Cohen argued, "Iran and its people are presented as a caricature of anti-American hatred—one that looks nothing like reality."²³ At the same time, Mideast scholars like Fawaz Gerges criticized the show for damaging American attempts at diplomacy. Gerges reiterated the impact of dehumanization and the Hollywood proclivity "to *reduce the humanity* [emphasis added] of the so-called 'other.'"²⁴

The show's plot played into the attitudes of many U.S. politicians and commentators—especially those with hawkish tendencies—who objected to the Obama administration negotiating with Iran, arguing that Iran could not be trusted. The irony of this view was demonstrated later when it was the U.S. under the Trump administration that reneged on the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in May of 2018, and reimposed sanctions that violated the agreement, while Iran had continued to abide by the deal.²⁵

Even the supporters of the negotiations framed the deal as a way to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon and as an alternative to war, echoing the assumption that Iran intended to develop a weapon and that the U.S. and Iran were bound toward an inevitable conflict. For example, 2016 Democratic presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton, supported the deal but made sure to express her suspicion of Iranians, echoing the prejudiced stereotype that Iranians cannot be trusted.²⁶

Despite significant progress in the negotiations by February of 2014—the parties met in Vienna and agreed to a framework and agenda to guide the talks—Hollywood was still playing up the image of Iranians as terrorists and the need for military confrontation.

20. The White House, "Fact Sheet: Sanctions Related to Iran," *Obama White House*, July 31, 2012,

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/07/31/fact-sheet-sanctions-related-iran>.

21. Laura Durkay, "Homeland" is the Most Bigoted Show on Television," *The Washington Post*, October 2, 2014,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/10/02/homeland-is-the-most-bigoted-show-on-television/>.

22. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0MzMCRX_bkY. Last accessed October 1, 2021.

23. Michael Cohen, "Homeland Isn't Just Bad TV, It Peddles the Worst Lies About US Foreign Policy," *The Guardian*, December 16, 2013,

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/16/homeland-worst-lies-us-power-foreign-policy>.

24. LA. Ross, "Iran Expert: Showtime's 'Homeland' Creates Tension for American Diplomacy," *The Wrap*, December 15, 2013,

<https://www.thewrap.com/showtimes-homeland-creates-tension-american-diplomacy/>.

25. IAEA Board of Governors, "Verifying and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015)," IAEA, May 24, 2018, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/18/06/gov2018-24.pdf>.

26. Reuters, "Clinton: I Don't Trust the Iranians," *Business Insider*, July 16, 2015, <https://www.businessinsider.com/clinton-i-dont-trust-the-iranians-2015-7>.

The 2014 *Robocop* movie was yet another blockbuster action film that incited hostility and depicted attacks on Iran. The film's plot revolves around an arms corporation, OmniCorp, which is marketing its new robotic "peacekeepers." In order to display their capabilities, the militarized robots are unleashed in Iran under the label, "Operation Freedom Tehran," occupying the city and its frightened inhabitants.²⁷ The unsettling scene that calls attention to the idea of war with Iran, reflects not only U.S. foreign policy debates, but also the consistent portrayal of Iran and Iranians as enemies to be neutralized.

As these examples show, the image of Iran, and by extension Iranians, in popular culture has been directly linked to contemporary politics and helped shape the way Americans view both Iranians and U.S. foreign policy on Iran. Solidifying this biased view, U.S. politicians and news media have repeated similar tropes.

Despite the years of antagonism that preceded President George W. Bush's infamous "axis of evil" speech,²⁸ Iranians were still shocked by the president's remarks. Bush's speech came in the wake of the tragic September 11th attacks on U.S. soil. However, no Iranians were involved in the attacks, President Khatami—Iran's first reformist president who had called for a "dialogue of civilizations"—quickly condemned the attack, and ordinary Iranians held candlelight vigils to mourn the victims. The tragedy of September 11th initiated a new era in U.S. foreign policy and militarism. But the new "war on terror" became less about retribution for 9/11 and more about extending U.S. authority and hawkish policies. By directing his campaign on North Korea, Iraq and Iran, Bush effectively ignored the roots of the attack and shifted his focus to longtime "enemy" targets.

Given the pervasive impact of 9/11 and the subsequent "forever wars" launched in its aftermath, putting Iran at the center of the narrative brought up old wounds and regurgitated the image of Iran as "evil"—a state of profound and unalterable immorality. By equating the Iranian nation with the condition of being evil, Bush stripped Iranians of any humanity.

Iran's demonization became so commonplace in U.S. political discourse that politicians could mock its people, threaten its cultural artifacts, jovially sing about bombing the country and even deny its people vaccines in a pandemic. For instance, in 2007, then-Senator John McCain responded to a question that suggested the U.S. should attack Iran by reciting "bomb, bomb, bomb, Iran" to the tune of the popular Beach Boys song "Barbara Ann."²⁹ The audience reacted with laughter. In fact, McCain was referring to an actual parody song that was recorded in 1980 and called for violence against Iran during the hostage crisis.³⁰

27. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Alk94MJS_Sc. Last accessed October 1, 2021.

28. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btKjHhAM7hZw>. Last accessed October 1, 2021.

29. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-zoPgv_nYg. Last accessed October 1, 2021.

30. Martha M. Hamilton, "Bomb Iran: Hit Tune," *The Washington Post*, August 27, 1980, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1980/08/27/bomb-iran-hit-tune/8fc3aa0c-6c0b-4893-a47f-c2b0de1d1971/>.

Under the Trump administration—which broadly abandoned all traditional political decorum and restraint—offensive language and attitudes increased in American political discussions. The subject of Iran fared no better, as Iran became the central target of the administration’s foreign policy adversaries. President Trump himself referred to Iran as “a terrorist *nation* [emphasis added],” subsuming the Iranian people and the state into the same problematic category.³¹ While Secretary of State Pompeo commented about Iranian people starving if their government did not submit to American demands,³² Senator Lindsey Graham quipped about how “terrible” it would be for his DNA to show Iranian ancestry.³³ Senator Graham’s comments were especially egregious to Iranians and Americans of Iranian heritage for its racist implications, suggesting there is something wrong with Iranian blood or DNA.

When President Trump threatened to attack Iranian cultural sites if Iran retaliated for the extrajudicial assassination of its General, Qasem Soleimani, he not only invoked the memory of the 52 American hostages from 1979, but also openly threatened to commit a war crime. The idea of attacking a country’s cultural artifacts goes beyond the rules of war and is plainly an attack on the people themselves and their very identity. The atmosphere against Iran under the Trump administration became so hostile that the idea of Iranian villainy entered in the most bizarre places. On January 6th, 2021, as Trump supporters rioted and attacked the Capitol, Senator Susan Collins believed “the Iranians” had attacked.³⁴

The idea of Iran in the American psyche is not limited to one political party, but rather, the demonization of Iran is so widespread that even well-intentioned politicians forget that Iranians are also human beings deserving the same rights as all others. Though the international community, human rights and public health experts beseeched world leaders not to politicize the COVID-19 pandemic because it would be immoral and detrimental to global efforts to combat the crisis, the U.S. continued to relentlessly sanction countries like Iran.

Worse yet, vaccine rollout efforts were also framed in political terms. In June of 2021, Representative Ted Lieu tweeted, “We should help our allies first instead of letting a third party decide where vaccines should go. Since there are not enough vaccines, should we help India or Iran? We should help India first.”³⁵ Lieu’s comments drew strong pushback from advocacy groups and commentators who saw the idea of depriving ordinary Iranians of much-needed vaccines because of the U.S. adversarial position against their government as politicization of the pandemic.³⁶ That it was Iranians which were chosen as the population less worthy of the vaccine is a predictable outcome of decades of dehumanization.

31. “Trump Calls Iran ‘a Terrorist Nation Like Few Others,’” *The Washington Post*, October 13, 2017,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/trump-calls-iran-a-terrorist-nation-like-few-others/2017/10/13/810b8214-b025-11e7-9b93-b97043e57a22_video.html.

32. Brendan Cole, “Mike Pompeo Says Iran Must Listen to U.S. ‘If They Want Their People to Eat,’” *Newsweek*, November 9, 2018,

<https://www.newsweek.com/mike-pompeo-says-iran-must-listen-us-if-they-want-their-people-eat-1208465>.

33. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qu23vuCMOow>. Last accessed October 1, 2021.

34. John Haltiwanger, “GOP Sen. Susan Collins Thought the Mostly White Pro-Trump Mob that Stormed the Capitol was ‘the Iranians’ at First,” *Business Insider*, January 11, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/gop-sen-susan-collins-thought-capitol-siege-iranians-at-first-2021-1>.

35. <https://twitter.com/tedlieu/status/1400500984061698049?s=20>. Last accessed October 1, 2021.

36. To his credit, Congressman Lieu met with members of the Iranian-American community to listen to their grievances and issued a welcome apology, <https://www.niacouncil.org/news/niac-statement-on-rep-ted-lieu-apology/>.

U.S. news media—charged with the critical task of informing the public of the facts—have repeatedly failed at presenting a fair or accurate picture of Iran. While politicians and fictional films and television have played an important role in demonizing Iran, journalists and news publications have a particular responsibility to report the truth. Instead, they often play right into the same caricatures of Iran that sees it as a grave threat to U.S. security. When U.S. bomber jets fly over the Persian Gulf, the media simply parrots the official U.S. narrative and presents it as a “defensive move”³⁷ without questioning the presence of U.S. military assets across the world and at Iran’s borders.

Amplifying the notion that Iran presents a real and immediate threat to the United States, *Politico* followed a story for over two weeks³⁸ of Iranian ships that were possibly headed to Venezuela. Yet, American reporters sometimes fail to challenge official stories or raise questions about the double standards of U.S. policy, which allows U.S. ships to police the world and treats global waters as U.S. territory. The saga ended with nothing eventful, however, it reflected the nature of U.S. media to utilize the rhetoric of Iran as a consummate “threat” for the American public.

In addition to the inflated security fears, the media has also presented false information, such as stating or publishing pieces that refer to Iran’s “nuclear weapons program.”³⁹ In reality, Iran does not currently have a nuclear weapons program, but rather a civilian nuclear program that is permitted under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to which Iran is a signatory, and its program has been monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for years to ensure that it remains a civilian program. Nevertheless, this misleading information gets published repeatedly. In August of 2021, Elliott Abrams—notorious for his role in the illegal Iran-Contra affair—published a piece in *The National Review*, falsely referring to “Iran’s nuclear-weapons program.”⁴⁰ With no sense of irony, 18 years to the day of the U.S. invasion of Iraq—based on the false evidence that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction—*Yahoo News* posted a piece titled, “Iran Probably Already Has the Bomb. Here’s What to Do About It.”⁴¹

It is no surprise given the force of this narrative and the inaccurate information readily available for public consumption that American perceptions of Iran’s nuclear program do not reflect reality. According to a 2021 survey from Brookings,⁴² 60.5 percent of Americans think Iran possesses nuclear weapons, when it has none, while only 51.7 percent think

37. Associated Press, “U.S. Bomber Mission Over Persian Gulf Aimed at Cautioning Iran,” *Politico*, December 30, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/12/30/bomber-mission-persian-gulf-iran-452349>.

38. The story continued from May 29th, 2021 to June 17, 2021 and involved several different reporters, the links can be found here: <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/05/29/iranian-warships-venezuela-491414>, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/02/iranian-navy-ships-atlantic-by-thursday-491600>, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/04/iran-warships-atlantic-crossing-weapons-transfers-491898>, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/09/venezuela-cuba-iran-ships-492602>, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/10/defense-iranian-ships-venezuela-493189>, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/11/iran-venezuela-biden-weapons-493533>, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/17/iran-ships-venezuela-495013>

39. <https://twitter.com/WideAsleepNima/status/1322192599873179648?s=20>. Last accessed October 1, 2021.

40. Elliott Abrams, “Biden Needs a Plan B for the Iran Talks,” *The National Review*, August 4, 2021, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2021/08/biden-needs-a-plan-b-for-the-iran-talks/>.

41. R. James Woolsey, “Iran Probably Already Has the Bomb. Here’s What to Do About It,” *Yahoo*, March 19, 2021, https://www.yahoo.com/news/iran-probably-already-bomb-192403407.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2x1LmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAIrq8H8annXP2GgdL-HmT0EpxvkIBIFYT9x_XO5acdRxdgYrsXgs8RKgCFTgwnTvCwXnzDvLl7l5jAfdn8GfZUH4tD-Z9id2bqHSHF3y0y1Rq9i4dQhbfLWAwlqxDsCIm09S2Wqoyild4xQhSI2MDW55uv3eZsMcHCLffaRntgU_.

42. Shibley Telhami, “Most Americans, including half of young Democrats, disapprove Biden’s handling recent Gaza crisis,” *Brookings*, July 29, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/07/29/most-americans-including-half-of-young-democrats-disapprove-of-bidens-handling-of-recent-gaza-crisis/>.

Israel possesses a nuclear weapon, when it has an arsenal of nuclear weapons.⁴³ The fact that more Americans falsely think Iran has nuclear weapons than know that Israel indeed does have nuclear weapons, is a testament to the fact that the information the American public is being given is itself dishonest. The demonization of Iranians helps make this fraudulent image production possible, which has deliberately contributed to imprudent U.S. policies.

Thus, a combination of U.S. political rhetoric, news media, and popular culture have constructed an image of Iran and Iranians that sees them as the quintessential villain, completing the process of dehumanization wherein our views are informed by old resentments and racist sentiments, which have come to generalize an entire people as a permanent enemy. Though it is Iranians in Iran that have borne the brunt of this state of affairs, such demonization and its subsequent policies have also had an undeniable impact on Iranian Americans, both in practical ways and on their psyche.

Stories from the Diaspora

As a more recent immigrant group in the U.S., most Iranian Americans have loved ones that still reside in Iran⁴⁴ and connections to the country's culture and traditions. In fact, for many Iranian Americans, sustaining their cultural roots has been an integral part of their shared experience. Iranian-American scholar Neda Maghbouleh has observed this pattern stating:

"The young diaspora Iranians I've met...a variegated group in terms of class background, political attachments, sexualities, and much more—but they all for the most part continue to bridge the gaps you describe in order to sustain a sense of self, to sustain material and symbolic connections to Iran. I would say that's the relevant pattern here – no matter the disparities in their proximities, distances, relationships, or connections to Iran – that each young person strives, or has strived, in creative ways to affirm and root themselves in that way."⁴⁵

This phenomenon in some ways may be tied to the fact that, as an immigrant community in the United States whose country of heritage has long been demonized by their home country, Iranian Americans have had to continuously grapple with the oppositions of their dual identities. Navigating this unfriendly political atmosphere at home has posed challenges to a sense of belonging for many in the community.

So prevalent is this feeling of exclusion that many in the Iranian-American diaspora have studied and written about their experiences as adults, helping give rise to an entire genre of diaspora scholarship and writing that can be seen in university courses or centers

43. Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, "Fact Sheet: Israel's Nuclear Inventory," *Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation*, March 31, 2020, <https://armscontrolcenter.org/fact-sheet-israels-nuclear-arsenal/>.

44. According to a 2020 public opinion survey from PAAIA, 9 out of 10 Iranian Americans have family or friends in Iran, <https://paaia.org/educate/surveys>.

45. Nazli Koca, "The Limits of Whiteness: An Interview with Neda Maghbouleh," *University of Notre Dame*, September 4, 2020, <https://sites.nd.edu/literatures-of-annihilation-exile-resistance/interviews/the-limits-of-whiteness-an-interview-with-neda-maghbouleh/>.

dedicated to the study of the Iranian diaspora.⁴⁶ One common thread found in these works and the reflections of Iranian Americans is negotiating their identities in a hostile environment and its impact on their lives. *My Shadow is My Skin* is just one of many anthologies that collects essays from Iranian Americans sharing their personal stories. These collected writings provide the depth and character that depictions of Iranians in U.S. media so glaringly lack. They also provide a window into the lived experience of the Iranian-American community, whose Iranian heritage has often been the subject of political aggression at home in the United States. As one of these essays, written by diaspora scholar Amy Malek, painfully notes:

"Iranian Americans have grown up negotiating these kinds of experiences and memories in a constant (though not always conscious) process, where geopolitics and personal identity are always intertwined. I didn't see myself or my heritage in my favorite storybooks. Instead, I saw what I was told was my father's homeland on news programs, and it wasn't much like what I saw in our family photos."⁴⁷

The idea of seeing a politicized caricature of Iran on TV and news appears to be a common experience. Iranian-American writer Firoozeh Dumas describes her early experiences in the U.S. as a child in her memoir on growing up Iranian in America:

"As he was settling into his new job, a group of Americans in Tehran were taken hostage in the American embassy. My father was laid off. Every evening, we sat in front of the television and watched the news for updates on the hostage situation. For 444 nights, we waited. With each passing day, palpable hatred grew among many Americans, hatred not just of the hostage takers but of all Iranians. The media didn't help."⁴⁸

The experience of U.S. politics as an Iranian American has been captured in fiction as well, as seen in a recent novel by Olivia Abtahi, *Perfectly Parvin*.⁴⁹ The book tells the story of 14-year-old Parvin Mohammadi, who must not only navigate the rough terrain of adolescence, but also the added complication of being a second-generation Iranian American. While Abtahi's book provides a lighthearted story of teenage angst, it also illustrates the microaggressions and anxieties that later generations of Iranian Americans continue to face as a consequence of the dehumanization of their kin.

It is important to note that these are not mere sentiments derived from news stories and political rhetoric. When Iranian Americans describe their actual experiences, it becomes clear that the impact of this demonization goes beyond words alone. Though most Americans can seemingly forget an incident in an Apple store nearly 10 years ago, in which an Iranian-American teenager was denied the purchase of Apple devices after a salesclerk heard her speaking Persian, these are traumas that the community shares as assaults on their culture and identity.⁵⁰

46. See Center for Iranian Diaspora Studies at San Francisco State University, <https://ids.sfsu.edu/home>.

47. Amy Malek. "Negotiating Memories," in *My Shadow is My Skin: Voices from the Iranian Diaspora*, ed. Katherine Whitney and Leila Emery. (University of Texas Press, 2020), 102. Pg. 111.

48. Dumas, Firoozeh. *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America*. New York: Villard, 2003. Pg. 116-117.

49. Abtahi, Olivia. *Perfectly Parvin*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2021.

50. Jamal Abdi, "Sanctions at the Genius Bar," *New York Times*, July 11, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/12/opinion/why-is-apple-discriminating-against-iranian-americans.html>.

When we asked the community to share some of their stories, what we got was a recognizable pattern of discriminatory experiences, sometimes based on discriminatory policies.⁵¹ Some more common themes that Iranian Americans shared having experienced include: airport and travel related discrimination, the effects of the Trump administration's Muslim Ban, comments and slurs about their heritage, ethnicity, and presumed Islamic religious identity from schoolmates and coworkers, issues in work interviews, feelings of alienation, and frustration with constant negative media portrayals—several specifically noted *Not Without My Daughter*.

Not surprisingly, ports of entry tended to be a location where bigoted interactions were commonplace. As one respondent shared:

“One time I took my elderly parents to the airport for a flight to Iran about 4 hours early. The check-in gate area was completely deserted. We walked up to the one counter where two people were working. As soon as the ticket agent saw the Iranian passports, he said ‘I’m sorry but you’re going to miss your flight.’ He then told the other person to hand search their luggage. The other man was very apologetic and clearly knew what he was doing was wrong. He was as polite as could be in a very obviously discriminatory situation.”

Being detained for extra questioning and searches at the airport was shared by others, as well. Another Iranian-American gentleman stated, “I have been interrogated and disrespected *many* times at airports inside and outside of the U.S. (when I’m heading to the U.S.). It so happens that I’m always selected for extra security checks.” These occurrences are not isolated to only younger generations. One older Iranian-American woman explained, “Almost every time I return from Iran now, either my husband or I get detained—even temporarily—at the airport. We are old now, 68 and 71. I guess they think we are old terrorists.”

The inclination to associate Iranians with terrorism was in fact another experience that weighed heavily on several respondents, as one explained, “This happens all the time, I always feel like I have to disavow the Iranian regime whenever anything happens (I was born in the United States) or pledge ‘loyalty’ to the United States in conversation. People used to ask if my father was either in al Qaeda or agreed with them all the time.”

While most Americans may not be cognizant of the depth of negative depictions of Iran and Iranians, Iranian Americans are wholly aware of it as part of their life experience. One respondent described, “We are always seen as terrorists, and somehow backwards. Remember when the Shahs of Sunset came out? An Iranian coworker and I joked, ‘well being overly materialistic might be better for our image than terrorist?’ But yes, people watch *Not Without My Daughter* and assume this is all of us.” Another respondent reiterated the inescapable image of Iranians as “bad guys,” stating, “The portrayal of

51. In August and September of 2021, NIAC shared a questionnaire with members of the Iranian-American community to gather stories from the diaspora: <https://secure.everaction.com/kzo8Euh2CU-ewKoTGSZV9g2?emci=89f0be68-4b04-ec11-b563-501ac57b8fa7&emdi=b338697f-5b04-ec11-b563-501ac57b8fa7&ceid=1290072>. The stories quoted here are responses to that questionnaire and should be understood in the larger context of the report, as supplementary evidence of the arguments posited.

Middle Easterners in general and Iranians in particular as bad guys is so entrenched in the American psyche that you can never escape it.”

The media caricatures of Iran—some of which were outlined above—are seared into the community’s collective consciousness. It should come as no surprise then, that these experiences have fostered a sense of exclusion at home in the U.S. and reinforced feelings of alienation. As one Iranian American woefully explained, “The pervasive anti-Iran propaganda and demonization spewed out at all levels of government and media at times take their toll. Like many other Iranians, this does sometimes make me feel alienated.” For some Iranian Americans, it seems their Iranian identity undermines their ability to speak freely about U.S. politics without accusations of “dual loyalty.” Another respondent lamented, “The enmity against Iran is a permanent feature in American life...I was born and raised in the U.S., but I feel more accepted, valued, seen among Iranians.” Consequently, this sense of not belonging makes it harder for Iranian Americans to fully participate in American life.

Moreover, Iranian Americans describe discrimination and improper comments in their workplace. An Iranian-American professor believed that their prospects had been limited due to their Iranian heritage, “Personally, I have experienced discrimination in tenure and promotion processes, and institutional supports. Existing sanctions have blocked my academic collaborations with Iranian scholars and institutes.” Another respondent shared the story of his supervisor making inappropriate remarks at work, “My boss has asked me (jokingly) if I have a bomb in my briefcase during an official meeting. Once he commented the very common line, ‘if you don’t like it, try going back to your country.’”

A recent news story about an Iranian-born scientist, Fariba Moeinpour, suing the University of Alabama at Birmingham over allegations of discrimination, provides another example of similar treatment.⁵² According to Moeinpour, she suffered nine years of harassment from a co-worker, which included being physically threatened. The lawsuit also claims Moeinpour’s co-worker told her to “Go back to Iran” and that “Our country does not need your kind.” Such comments plainly show that Moeinpour was targeted for her Iranian heritage. More striking than the abuses Moeinpour claims, is the allegation that the university failed to take action to protect her.

The prevalence of these experiences is a product of the decades-long dehumanization of Iranians outlined above. In the case of U.S. foreign policy on Iran, it is this systematic dehumanization, which allows us to implement and accept policies that devastate millions of innocent people, all while championing the notion of human rights. Although these policies have been in place for decades, no instance captures the magnitude of cruelty like the U.S. response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

52. Corky Siemaszko, “Iranian-Born Scientist Sues University of Alabama at Birmingham, Alleges Discrimination,” *NBC News*, October 6, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/iranian-born-scientist-says-university-alabama-birmingham-colleague-tormented-her-n1280742>

Despite being one of the first and hardest hit countries by the pandemic—and international calls to lift sanctions in light of the global crisis⁵³—the U.S. under President Trump *increased* sanctions on Iran. As of this writing, that inhumane policy has continued under the Biden administration. But this is only one example of U.S. policies that have undercut U.S. interests, caused immeasurable suffering for millions of Iranians, difficulty for Americans of Iranian heritage, and contradicted the values we claim. The next section of this report examines the actual policies that have resulted in part from this process of demonization, as well as their impact on the Iranian-American community and their families in Iran.

53. United Nations, "COVID-19: Lift sanctions 'bringing suffering and death', urge UN rights experts," *United Nations*, August 7, 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/08/1069732>.



Ideological Policies

The anti-Iranian discourse that has come to dominate U.S. policies around Iran has contributed to actions taken by the U.S. government, which have undermined our own national interests and global security concerns. As such, U.S. policies on Iran have demonstrated more ideological, than logical, reasoning.

U.S. Foreign Policy

Tied to the U.S. position on Iran is its “ironclad commitment” to Israel. Israeli officials—most notably its longest-serving Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—often invoke Iran as a way to deflect from their own misconduct against Palestinians and inflate a threat to justify their violations of international law.⁵⁴ Thus, being almost fanatically anti-Iran and pro-Israel have become two pillars of U.S. foreign policy discourse.

There are many examples of the marked double standard in which the U.S. approaches these two states, yet, one recent event illustrates the depth of this double standard.⁵⁵ In April of 2021—just days after the U.S. and Iran had agreed to indirect talks in an effort to restore the JCPOA—Israel carried out attacks on an Iranian nuclear facility. In response to the attack, the Iranian government announced its decision to increase its uranium enrichment to 60 percent. Reacting to Iran’s announcement, Secretary of State Blinken stated, “We take very seriously its *provocative* [emphasis added] announcement of an intent to begin enriching uranium at 60 percent...I have to tell you the step calls into question Iran’s seriousness with regard to the nuclear talks.”⁵⁶ Rather than condemn Israel for its illegal attack inside of Iran, in what was a direct move to sabotage the Biden administration’s efforts toward nuclear diplomacy, the U.S. focused its ire on Iran for its decision to increase enrichment levels.

Outside the context of ideological leanings that favor Israel and oppose Iran, there is no reasonable explanation for ignoring the party that carried out actions in violation of international law, and disregarded U.S. policy objectives, while faulting the victim of an attack. That U.S. officials can so quickly overlook any wrongdoing by Israel and turn their attention to Iran, demonstrates the zealous manner in which we approach our foreign policy. In addition to coloring our own policies, our inability to act as even-handed brokers also undermines the claim of the U.S. as a global leader or arbiter of peace.

54. Assal Rad, “America’s Ironclad Commitment to Israel is More Ideological Than Logical,” *Mondoweiss*, June 8, 2021, <https://mondoweiss.net/2021/06/americas-ironclad-commitment-to-israel-is-more-ideological-than-logical/>.

55. Assal Rad, “The Unmistakable Double Standard of US Foreign Policy,” *Inkstick*, April 20, 2021, <https://inkstickmedia.com/the-unmistakable-double-standard-of-us-foreign-policy/>.

56. Humeyra Pamuk and Daphne Psaledakis, “Blinken Calls Iran’s Uranium Enrichment Move ‘Provocative,’” *Reuters*, April 14, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/blinken-calls-irans-uranium-enrichment-move-provocative-2021-04-14/>.

Of course, anti-Iran sentiments have been a part of U.S. political discourse for decades. The magnitude of these feelings can be seen in how the U.S. has approached its policy on Iran and rebuffed attempts by Iranian officials through the years at détente. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), the U.S. openly supported Saddam Hussein despite the fact that it was Iraq, under Hussein's leadership, that illegally invaded and occupied Southwestern Iran in September of 1980. Not only was the U.S. aware that Saddam was using chemical weapons on Iranians, but they also provided intelligence to Iraq to help them carry out these heinous attacks.⁵⁷ It is noteworthy that years later, George W. Bush recalled these very attacks in order to show the severity of Saddam Hussein's inhumanity and make a case for the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.⁵⁸

The dehumanization of Iranian victims of the war was not limited to Saddam's actions. On July 3, 1988, as the war raged on in the Persian Gulf, the United States accidentally shot down a civilian flight, Iran Air 655, killing the 290 passengers and crew that included 66 children.⁵⁹ The U.S. initially denied the incident, but as the evidence mounted U.S. officials shifted their tone showing no remorse, as Vice President Bush infamously declared, "I will never apologize for the United States of America. Ever. I don't care what the facts are."⁶⁰ This obstinate refusal to even apologize for killing innocent civilians is a testament to how the humanity of Iranian people has been disparaged at the hands of U.S. politics.

At the same time, repeated U.S. administrations have snubbed the efforts of Iranian presidents to ease tensions with the United States and alter—even if mildly—their adversarial relationship. In the 1990s, after the war with Iraq had ended and Iran entered a phase of reconstruction, President Rafsanjani led efforts to rebuild Iran's economy—favoring privatization and economic openness—its relations with its neighbors, and even made attempts to improve Iran's fraught relationship with the United States.

In 1989, the newly inaugurated President Bush hoped for assistance in freeing American hostages held in Lebanon. In his inaugural speech Bush appeared to make a subtle promise to anyone that helped with their release, stating, "Goodwill begets goodwill." Rafsanjani took this as an opportunity to garner American goodwill, making significant efforts to help free the Americans. But as historian John Ghazvinian explains, Rafsanjani's efforts were to no avail, as the U.S. chose not to return Iran's goodwill gesture:

"For Rafsanjani, it was a devastating blow. For nearly three years, he had put his neck on the line, begging hard-liners to suspend their disbelief, reassuring them he would have something to show for his diplomacy, and insisting that the time had come to give America a chance. After all this, he had come away empty-handed."⁶¹

57. Mark Memmott, "New Details on How U.S. 'Helped Saddam as He Gassed Iran,'" *NPR*, August 26, 2013,

<https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2013/08/26/215733981/new-details-on-how-u-s-helped-saddam-as-he-gassed-iran>.

58. <https://twitter.com/AssalRad/status/1440716253073604623?s=20>. Last accessed October 14, 2021.

59. Ghazvinian, John H. *America and Iran: A History, 1720 to the Present*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021.

60. *Ibid.* Pg. 371.

61. *Ibid.* Pg. 387.

This pattern of Iranian overtures being rejected by the United States continued after Rafsanjani's presidency. After Rafsanjani served two-terms as president, Iranian voters went to the polls in droves to usher in their first-reformist president in 1997 with the hopes of greater reforms not only for Iran's economy, but also for Iranian society and politics. With the election of Mohammad Khatami in 1997, Iranians were optimistic that they would see greater social and political freedoms, as well as a more open society that sought to be a part of the global community.

To that end, Khatami began a campaign to improve relations with countries across the world, promoted the idea of a "dialogue of civilizations," and appeared in American news programs expressing his admiration of the West. More than just words, under Khatami, Iran was working with the State Department behind the scenes on Afghanistan, in a mutual effort to combat the Taliban.⁶² Given the circumstances, Iranians were shocked in 2002 when then-President Bush referred to Iran as being part of an "axis of evil." Historian Ervand Abrahamian aptly observed the impact of Bush's speech on Khatami and the reform movement in Iran more broadly:

"The reformers suffered yet another blow from an unexpected quarter—the United States. It came in the form of the 'axis of evil' speech delivered by President Bush in January 2002...A British intelligence analyst argued that the speech had been counterproductive since it 'played into the hands of the conservatives, bolstered their anti-Americanism, and helped silence the reformers.'" ⁶³

This same pattern of rejecting Iranian attempts at rapprochement and weakening the engagement-friendly camp in Iran was repeated years later, when the Trump administration abandoned the diplomatic gains made by his predecessor and single-handedly compromised a historic non-proliferation agreement endorsed by the international community—the Iran Nuclear Deal.

In many ways, the Trump administration's Iran policy encapsulated the ideological impulses and systematic demonization of Iranians that has informed U.S. policy for so many decades. It is important to note that while the Obama administration did, in fact, successfully engage in diplomacy with Iran, it still utilized the all-too-familiar language of dehumanization and made sure to assuage allies like Saudi Arabia and Israel, such as awarding Israel the largest U.S.-aid package in U.S. history.⁶⁴ Obama-era sanctions on Iran caused economic strife for millions of ordinary Iranians, as President Obama himself described the impact of sanctions in the harshest terms.

However, Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign was unmatched in its irrational political posturing and cruelty towards millions of innocent Iranian people, exemplified by the Muslim Ban he imposed his first week in office that essentially barred Iranians from coming to the U.S. and separated many families.

62. Abrahamian, Ervand. *A History of Modern Iran*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

63. *Ibid.* Pg. 192.

64. Matt Spetalnick, "U.S., Israel Sign \$38 Billion Military Aid Package," *Reuters*, September 14, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-israel-statement/u-s-israel-sign-38-billion-military-aid-package-idUSKCN11K2CI>.

While President Trump claimed that his goal was to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, the deal he tore up guaranteed this very objective by putting strict limits on Iran's civilian nuclear program, as well as international oversight to ensure Iran was adhering to those limitations.

Despite the clear benefits of the agreement, Trump spent the early months of his presidency demonizing Iran and attacking the deal. In October of 2017, Trump received international backlash for the decision not to certify the deal and for threatening its efficacy. Observers noted the belligerent tone of Trump's speech and its intent to goad Iran into a response.⁶⁵ Going beyond the common rhetoric in U.S. politics that vilifies Iran, Trump added an insult to Iranian pride by referring to the Persian Gulf as the "Arabian Gulf," which drew strong reactions from Iranian officials, ordinary Iranians, and even Iranian Americans as an affront to their heritage.

Eventually following through on his threats, Trump made an announcement on May 8, 2018 to officially withdraw the U.S. from the JCPOA. In his remarks, the President doubled down on his aggressive language referring to "Iran's bloody ambitions," and even recalled the hostage trope by stating:

"we will be instituting the highest level of economic sanction, any nation that helps Iran in its quest for nuclear weapons could also be strongly sanctioned by the United States, America will not be held hostage [emphasis added] to nuclear blackmail...Today's action sends a critical message, the United States no longer makes empty threats, when I make promises, I keep them."⁶⁶

Even months after Trump abrogated the deal, Iran continued to abide by the limitations placed on it within the deal,⁶⁷ hoping that other parties to the agreement would be able to fulfill Iran's promised economic relief. To inhibit such measures, the Trump administration threatened anyone who did business with Iran with U.S. sanctions violations.

Iran's economy spiraled to record-breaking inflation, increased deficit, and growing unemployment,⁶⁸ forcing millions of people into poverty and making essential goods scarce and unaffordable when available. Creating an atmosphere of increased pressure, in January of 2020, the U.S. carried out an extrajudicial assassination of Iran's top general, Qasem Soleimani, bringing the U.S. and Iran to the brink of war.

When the pandemic hit early in 2020, the Trump administration ignored calls to lift sanctions on humanitarian grounds. In fact, the Trump administration continued its flood of sanctions until their last days in office, sanctioning Iran's entire financial sector in the midst of a global health crisis in what amounts to a criminal act of collective punishment.

65. Julian Borger, Saeed Kamali, and Peter Beaumont, "Trump Threatens to Rip Up Iran Nuclear Deal Unless US and Allies Fix 'Serious Flaws,'" *The Guardian*, October 13, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/oct/13/trump-iran-nuclear-deal-congress>.

66. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QiMvern1LQ>. Last accessed November 24, 2021.

67. Francois Murphy and Robin Emmott, "Iran is Complying with Nuclear Deal Restrictions: IAEA Report," *Reuters*, August 30, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear/iran-is-complying-with-nuclear-deal-restrictions-iaea-report-idUSKCN1LF1KR>.

68. Abigail Ng, "These 6 Charts Show How Sanctions are Crushing Iran's Economy," *CNBC*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/23/these-6-charts-show-how-sanctions-are-crushing-irans-economy.html>.

If the intention of Trump's "maximum pressure" policy was to cause extreme pain for Iranians, sabotage the JCPOA and undermine the path back to diplomacy, then it achieved some of those objectives. However, according to its stated purpose, the policy was a resounding failure by every measure. Not only did Iran choose not to negotiate a new deal, but they also gradually reduced their compliance with the JCPOA and expanded their civilian nuclear program far beyond the limitations of the agreement. The Iranian government did not alter its behavior in the manner wished by the Trump administration, the Islamic Republic remained in power, and the U.S. became an international pariah.

Despite these clear failings, the Biden administration has, for the most part, maintained Trump's Iran policy. Though President Biden signaled as a candidate that he would restore the deal and lambasted Trump's failed policy on Iran, he did not address the issue of Iran early on in his presidency. By keeping sanctions in place—despite a continuing pandemic—and initially calling for Iran to return to compliance first in order to get sanctions relief, the Biden administration appeared little different from his predecessor from the Iranian perspective.

In overlooking the importance of the Iranian election in June of 2021, and a potential short-window to return to the deal under the diplomacy-friendly Rouhani administration—which had staked its presidency on engagement with the West and the JCPOA—the Biden administration further undermined the moderate and reformist voices in Iran. The ominous situation for moderates and reformists was further compounded by internal Iranian politics with the efforts of the Supreme Leader and hardliners to hamstringing the Rouhani administration. This helped to usher in a new hardline administration under Ebrahim Raisi and the consolidation of the conservative camp in Iran that had long said the U.S. could not be trusted.

The JCPOA was a historic non-proliferation agreement that was advantageous to global security interests and opened up opportunities for more diplomatic resolutions and cooperation in a region fraught with instability and conflict—in large part due to U.S. wars and interventions. However, the deal was sacrificed on the altar of anti-Iranian fanaticism that has undermined U.S. interests for far too long. These interests are reflected in the desires of the American public, a majority of which support diplomatic resolutions to global conflicts and a negotiated agreement on the nuclear issue with Iran.⁶⁹

The harrowing images of the Taliban's swift overtaking of Afghanistan after a two-decade U.S. war that cost trillions of dollars, thousands of lives and millions displaced, has only affirmed the futility of U.S. intervention and militarism. With this context, the need for diplomatic solutions that avert another catastrophic war in the Middle East become paramount.

69. Arshad Mohammed, "Most Americans Want More Diplomacy, Many Want Fewer Troops Abroad—Survey," *Reuters*, September 28, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/most-americans-want-more-diplomacy-many-want-fewer-troops-abroad-survey-2021-09-28/>.

While anti-Iranian attitudes have played a role in undermining U.S. and global security interests, these imprudent policies have plainly done the most damage to Iranians themselves. For ordinary Iranians, their livelihoods have been upended by a devastated economy, lives lost in a pandemic, and anxieties over possible war and further instability continue. Though they pale in comparison to the hardships of those residing in Iran, Iranian Americans have also felt the impact of these policies. First, because they must endure the feeling of stress and helplessness of watching their family and friends suffer in Iran.⁷⁰ But also, because these policies have created an atmosphere of hostility and prejudice toward Americans of Iranian heritage.

Under the Trump administration, the State Department inappropriately removed an Iranian-American foreign policy official after a smear campaign attacked her Iranian identity. As Sahar Nowrouzadeh told *NPR*, “My detail ended after senior officials engaged in what the report called significant discussion of my perceived national origin, my perceived political views and perceived affiliations with former administrations.”⁷¹

In fact, the Trump State Department was forced to cut funding to one of its “counter-propaganda” programs—a project ironically named “Iran Disinfo”—when it was revealed that the group used U.S. tax dollars to viciously slander and attack Iranian-American journalists, human rights researchers, and civil society advocates, as well as others who criticized Trump’s Iran policy.⁷² The level of antagonism during the Trump administration was so pronounced that Iranian-American video-producer and journalist, Yara Elmjouie, summed up the barrage of injustices on Twitter, “Our families are banned. Our heritage is a curse word (cc: Venmo). Our bank accounts are frozen. Our relatives are starved by US sanctions. Our scientists are denied access to an online course. Is it fair to conclude the Trump admin hates Iranians?”⁷³

Despite a change in administration, this air of hostility—which predates the Trump administration—has continued, as seen with the smear campaign that targeted a Biden-administration appointee for her Iranian heritage.⁷⁴ The accusations of dual loyalty that Ariane Tabatabai endured is but one example of how Iranian Americans are regularly reminded that their American identity is considered somehow less authentic than their fellow Americans.

The impact of these anti-Iranian enmities for Iranian Americans goes beyond the realm of foreign policy. Yet, the discriminatory policies outlined below are inextricably tied to U.S. attitudes about Iran and their unremitting vilification of an entire country and its people.

70. Mohammad Nasiri, “Beset by Inflation, Iranians Struggle with High Food Prices,” *Associated Press*, September 29, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/business-lifestyle-iran-nuclear-economy-prices-cbac212486fa405bb16711712ddb278a>.

71. Bobby Allyn, “Watchdog Report: Trump Official Punished Public Servant Over Her Iranian Heritage,” *NPR*, November 14, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/11/14/779504909/watchdog-report-trump-official-punished-public-servant-over-her-iranian-heritage>.

72. Negar Mortazavi and Murtaza Hussain, “State Department Cut Funding for Controversial ‘Iran Disinfo’ Project—But Kept Working with Its Creators,” *The Intercept*, September 22, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/09/22/iran-disinfo-trump-state-department/>.

73. <https://twitter.com/yelmjouie/status/1280590475314040832?s=20>. Last accessed October 14, 2021.

74. Matthew Petti, “Lawmakers Smear Iranian-American Biden Advisor with Unsubstantiated Conspiracy Theory,” *Responsible Statecraft*, June 4, 2021, <https://responsibletatecraft.org/2021/06/04/lawmakers-smear-iranian-american-biden-adviser-with-unsubstantiated-conspiracy-theory/>.

Immigration Policies

The Iranian Revolution, and its aftermath, spurred an unprecedented level of anti-Iranian sentiment in the U.S., leading to new discriminatory immigration policies targeting Iranian nationals. In response to the U.S. embassy seizure in Tehran in 1979, the Carter Administration conducted special immigration checks for Iranian students in America.⁷⁵ Iranian student visa holders were required to report to a local Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) office or campus representative with necessary documentation proving that they were in the United States legally or else be subject to deportation.

While the principle of enforcing student visa laws was not unusual, singling out only Iranian students under the pretext that they may hold anti-American sentiments exhibited the extent to which Iranian Americans were viewed with suspicion and accused of dual-loyalty. In fact, the D.C. Court of Appeals decision that overruled a prior judgement deeming the order unconstitutional, stated this suspicion explicitly: “[t]he international crisis and confrontation in Iran is of such severity that those who are illegally in this country create a clear and present danger because of their allegiance and illegal status.”⁷⁶

Severed diplomatic ties between Iran and the United States made the immigration process more complicated. The closure of the U.S. embassy in Iran meant that Iranians had to visit consulates in neighboring countries for interviews, and Iranian migrants in general were subject to stricter scrutiny, extra hurdles that exist to this day. Despite these obstacles, Iranians increasingly sought to leave the country—in the wake of the upheavals of the revolution and to escape the violence of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)—in hopes of resettling in the U.S. and Europe. According to the Department of Homeland Security, 98,141 Iranians immigrated to the U.S. between 1980 and 1989, compared to just 33,763 a decade prior.⁷⁷ While overall emigration from Iran increased during this time, the number of Iranian students studying in the U.S. decreased from 51,310 in 1980 to just under 2,000 students two decades later.⁷⁸

Several factors contributed to this trend. First, the post-revolutionary Iranian government discouraged studying abroad—describing it as a corrupting influence—and Iranian universities were themselves closed for a few years following the revolution, as the new government purged academia of influences not-aligned with the revolutionary state. Suspended diplomatic relations also meant that partnerships between American and Iranian universities deteriorated, and new sanctions made it more difficult for Iranian students to secure scholarships or manage their personal expenses.⁷⁹

75. David Rosenbaum, “Court Backs Carter on Iranian Students,” *New York Times*, December 28, 1979,

<https://www.nytimes.com/1979/12/28/archives/court-backs-carter-on-iranian-students-judges-say-government-has.html>.

76. https://scholar.google.com/scholar_case?case=15988035772286630183&q=Narenji+v.+Civiletti&hl=en&as_sdt=2006&as_vis=1. Last accessed October 7, 2021.

77. United States. Department of Homeland Security. *2019 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, 2020.

78. Stefan Trines, “Déjà Vu? The Rise and Fall of Iranian Student Enrollments in the U.S.,” *World Education News and Reviews*, February 6, 2017,

<https://wenr.wes.org/2017/02/educating-iran-demographics-massification-and-missed-opportunities>.

79. Ibid.

In the aftermath of 9/11, new discriminatory policies targeted Middle Eastern and Muslim immigrants. Immediately after the shocking attack, 762 predominantly Muslim and Middle Eastern immigrants were arrested and detained for months or years for being suspected to have “terrorist” ties. In most cases, credible indications of terrorist connections were not even the basis for detainment; rather, these arrests were made haphazardly without following normal trial laws.⁸⁰ None were found guilty of a terrorism-related offense, and only some minor immigration law violations were found. Even the Justice Department admitted that these individuals were treated unfairly, with some subjected to abuse in prison. Iranian Americans were not specifically targeted during this period, but the arrests contributed to a culture of fear, particularly among Muslim Iranians, and set another precedent for racial profiling in the enforcement of immigration law.

One year after 9/11, the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS) came into effect. The program required non-citizen males aged 16 to 45 from Iran, and 24 other mostly Muslim countries, to go through special registration with immigration officials, which included taking fingerprints and photographs. This policy was intended to be a temporary measure, but lasted until the Obama administration halted implementation and then eliminated the program in its entirety in 2016.⁸¹ Those who did not register faced the threat of imprisonment and anyone found guilty of not following proper immigration procedures faced deportation.

The discriminatory policy created additional barriers for immigrants from Iran and elsewhere, subjecting them to a time-intensive registration process founded on xenophobic and prejudicial conceptions of Americans of Middle Eastern heritage. Moreover, those in jail faced harsh conditions throughout the process. Ultimately, NSEERS resulted in zero terrorism-related convictions out of the nearly 140,000 who registered.⁸² Rather than promoting any national security objective, it led to the arrest and deportations of 13,000 individuals, including Iranian and other nationals.

One of those arrested was 31-year-old Lebanese national, Imad Daou, who moved to the United States from Lebanon to pursue postgraduate studies at Texas A&M International University. In 2003, he and his fiancée tried to return to Texas after visiting family in Mexico. At the border, a U.S. inspector found that Daou did not re-register in the NSEERS program within thirty days as required by law. Daou spent two months in jail before being deported and prohibited from returning to the United States for five years. NSEERS set back Daou’s academic pursuits and forced the family to relocate to Nuevo Laredo in Mexico. As Daou himself put it, “They put the rules in place to catch bad people, and the good people fall into the trap because the bad people know how to get around them.”⁸³

80. ACLU, “The September 11 Detainees,” *American Civil Liberties Union*, <https://www.aclu.org/other/september-11-detainees>.

81. NIAC, “Obama Dismantles Framework Targeting Muslims and Iranians,” *National Iranian American Council*, December 22, 2016, <https://www.niacouncil.org/news/obama-dismantles-framework-targeting-muslims-and-iranians/?locale=en>.

82. Alden, Edward H. *The Closing of the American Border: Terrorism, Immigration and Security since 9/11*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2009.

83. *Ibid.*, pg. 11-13.

9/11 also impacted students hoping to study in the United States with the introduction of the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVIS), a system used to keep track of foreign students in the United States. More rigorous security checks increased backlogs across the board for international students, but it particularly affected people from certain nationalities. Student visa applications for those from Iran or Iraq would now go to the State Department and FBI for a security advisory opinion (SAO), which entailed a more detailed security check.⁸⁴ This resulted in longer wait times for Iranian students that delayed their academic plans and even outright denials in some cases, particularly for those hoping to study STEM subjects.

In addition to the adverse impacts of NSEERS on the lives of so many people, the policy cultivated an atmosphere of intolerance in which detainees sometimes endured verbal abuse and humiliation. According to a 2004 report from the Iranian-American Bar Association (IABA), Iranian nationals who registered for the program were asked inappropriate questions such as their religious beliefs and financial information, were held in overcrowded facilities that failed to provide basic services such as adequate food, medicine and hygienic needs, and were subject to demeaning language.⁸⁵ The report cites actual cases in which INS officers referred to Iranian nationals as “animals” and threatened them with violence.

Fourteen years after the NSEERS program began, Congress passed the Visa Waiver Program Improvement and Terrorist Travel Prevention Act (H.R. 158), which is still in effect today. The passage of H.R. 158 happened in the wake of the San Bernadino terror attack of December 2015, and in a context of heightened xenophobic rhetoric from the likes of Donald Trump, who called for “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States.”⁸⁶ While H.R. 158 was deemed a safer alternative, the legislation was hugely discriminatory and helped pave the way for Trump’s Muslim Ban, which targeted all the same countries.

The law bars citizens of countries in the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) from participating if they recently traveled to or are dual nationals of Iran, Iraq, Sudan, or Syria. The VWP allows nationals of eligible countries—which includes most European countries, Japan, Australia, and South Korea—to travel to the U.S. for up to 90 days without obtaining a visa. Advocates for the policy justified its discriminatory measures by claiming that it would protect the U.S. from terrorism threats, particularly from ISIS. Beyond the fact that Iran is a country that has been fighting *against* ISIS, the policy also impacts people who are citizens of VWP nations, meaning that they have already gone through extensive background checks and therefore do not pose a significant security threat.

84. Ibid.

85. IABA, “A Review of the Treatment of Iranian Nationals by the INS in Connection with the Implementation of NSEERS Special Registration Program,” *Iranian American Bar Association*, February 6, 2004, <https://www.iaba.us/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/NSEERSReport-Feb-6-2004.pdf>.

86. Jessica Taylor, “Trump Calls for ‘Total and Complete Shutdown of Muslims Entering’ U.S.,” *NPR*, December 7, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/12/07/458836388/trump-calls-for-total-and-complete-shutdown-of-muslims-entering-u-s>.

H.R. 158's effect on the Iranian-American community is twofold. First, it makes it harder for Iranian Americans to see family members living abroad who are impacted by the policy. Such was the case for Iranian-British journalist Rana Rahimpour, who was stopped from flying to the U.S. to visit her family. Devastated by the policy's effect, she explained "my fully British daughter can't attend her American cousin's birthday [because] her mum was born in Iran." While the law did not exactly ban nationals of Iran, Iraq, Syria, or Sudan from visiting the U.S. outright, it was a precursor to a policy that did.

In January of 2017, President Donald Trump signed an Executive Order banning individuals from Iran and six other nations. Within hours, chaos and confusion spread at airports across the country. Affected individuals were suddenly detained despite holding visas that would have been considered valid just a day before. The effects were devastating: families were separated from one another, Iranians eager to start a new life in the U.S. were suddenly torn apart from their dreams, and people vulnerable to persecution in their home countries found themselves no longer able to seek refuge. That Iran was among the targeted list fit well into the Trump administration's anti-Iran posture, and was indeed a prelude to his "maximum pressure" policy described above.

Public outrage over the ban appeared quickly, with images of Americans of all stripes swarming U.S. airports both to protest the ban and show support for those affected by it. Iranian-American lawyers were among the many immigration attorneys and advocates who tried assisting helpless passengers in the chaos that ensued. In addition to nationwide protests at airports, organizations like the ACLU, NIAC, and CAIR mobilized immediately to assist those detained at airports and challenge the policy's legality.⁸⁷

Over the next several months, the Trump administration attempted to defend the policy's constitutionality in the courts. Several court decisions temporarily halted the implementation of parts of the order, leading Trump to sign the second version of the Muslim Ban in March 2017. This version exempted individuals who already held visas or green cards and removed Iraq from the list of affected countries. After facing additional legal challenges, Trump signed the third version of the ban in September of 2017, which added North Koreans and select Venezuelan officials to the list. Additional court struggles ensued, leading the Supreme Court to uphold the third version of the ban in June of 2018.⁸⁸

Throughout these iterations of the "Muslim Ban," the Trump Administration cited national security concerns and claimed that religious discrimination played no role in the selection of countries on the list, despite Trump's earlier bigoted comments as a presidential candidate. The Executive Order was simply the President's way of fulfilling a campaign promise. Yet again, a U.S. President was calling for discrimination against American Muslim and Middle Eastern communities in the name of national security.

87. James Doubek, "Thousands Protest at Airports Nationwide Against Trump's Immigration Order," *NPR*, January 29, 2017,

<https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/01/29/512250469/photos-thousands-protest-at-airports-nationwide-against-trumps-immigration-order>

88. ACLU, "Timeline of the Muslim Ban," *American Civil Liberties Union*, <https://www.aclu-wa.org/pages/timeline-muslim-ban>.

Perhaps the most ironic part of all was that no one has ever been killed on U.S. soil in a terrorist attack committed by someone from one of the countries included in the ban.⁸⁹ The physical separation of Iranian Americans from their families as a result of the ban was painful enough, but the ban symbolized more than just poor policy. It served as a reminder of the prejudice Iranian Americans have been vulnerable to for so long, as well as the weaponization of immigration policy to act upon those sentiments.

The Muslim Ban directly affected the outcome of tens of thousands of visa applications, but impacted thousands of more families who were deterred from even applying. Iranians made up half of visa applicants subject to the Trump Policy— a total of 45,406 Iranians between December 8, 2017 and January 20, 2021 (Biden's inauguration). Of these, about two-thirds were denied on the basis of the Muslim Ban while an additional 13% were denied visas on other grounds. This left less than 10,000 Iranians able to receive visas through a waiver or exception to the policy.⁹⁰

The story of one Iranian whose visa was denied because of the Muslim Ban is emblematic of the real-life pain caused by the ban to innocent people. Behzad, his wife and young son Parsa, moved to the United States in 2015, expecting Behzad to unite with them soon after he took care of their affairs in Iran. But by 2020, they remained separated from one another, with Behzad worrying over the separation's effect on his son. He told *Foreign Policy* that Parsa's "mother tried to explain to him why I can't come to the U.S. with him, but Parsa blames me for my absence."⁹¹ The resulting strained relationship between father and son is one that no child or parent should ever have to endure.

Hours after his inauguration on January 20th, 2021, President Biden signed a Proclamation rescinding the Trump Muslim Ban, which he rightly called "a stain on our national conscience and...inconsistent with our long history of welcoming people of all faiths and no faith at all."⁹² While the Proclamation brought relief to many, tens of thousands of Diversity Visa lottery recipients were left behind, with the Biden Administration citing statutory limitations to reinstating Diversity Visas from previous years.⁹³ As of this writing, the House Judiciary Committee approved immigration language for the reconciliation bill that, if signed into law, would provide visas to Diversity Visa recipients barred under Trump-era bans.

Outside of these major policies, other immigration practices have also discriminated against Iranian Americans in recent years. In 2020, after the illegal assassination of Iran's General Qasem Soleimani, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Seattle Field Office privately issued a directive calling for stricter vetting for people entering American soil— U.S. citizens and otherwise— with connections to Iran, Lebanon, or the Palestinian territories.⁹⁴

89. NIAC, "Trump's Muslim Ban Undermines American Interests," *National Iranian American Council*, November 29, 2017,

<https://www.niacouncil.org/news/trumps-muslim-ban-undermines-american-interests/?locale=en>.

90. https://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/presidentialproclamation/PP-9645_Monthly-Public-Reporting-January%202021.pdf. Last accessed October 7, 2021.

91. Saeed Jalili and Forough Alaei, "Separated Iranian Families Have Been in Self-Isolation for Years," *Foreign Policy*, April 6, 2020,

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/06/trump-travel-muslim-ban-separated-iranian-families-have-self-isolation-for-years/>.

92. Joe Biden, "Proclamation on Ending Discriminatory Bans on Entry to the United States," *The White House*, January 20, 2021,

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/20/proclamation-ending-discriminatory-bans-on-entry-to-the-united-states/>.

93. <https://fam.state.gov/fam/09FAM/09FAM050206.html>. Last accessed October 7, 2021.

94. Patrick Grubb, "Source Provides Directive Telling CBP Officers to Detain Iranian-Born Travelers," *The Northern Light*, January 29, 2020,

<https://www.thenorthernlight.com/stories/source-provides-directive-telling-cbp-officers-to-detain-iranian-born-travelers,9315>.

Iranian-American historian John Ghazvinian took to social media to share his experience of being inappropriately questioned about his views on Iran at JFK on January 5th, 2020, just days after Soleimani's assassination.⁹⁵

As more reports came in that Iranian Americans were experiencing detentions and irregularities upon attempting to enter the United States—causing U.S. politicians and activists to speak out online—CBP tweeted that the reports were false and no such directive was issued.⁹⁶ While Iranian Americans trying to enter the U.S. through the Blaine Port of Entry in Washington state or various airports found themselves detained without proper explanation for hours—and subject to invasive questions about connections to Iran or even their political views—CBP denied that it was singling out people of Iranian heritage.⁹⁷

Despite the initial denials, weeks later CBP was forced to admit that they wrongly targeted Americans of Iranian heritage and breached agency protocol.⁹⁸ Though the admission of wrongdoing was a welcome first step, it was of little solace for Iranian Americans whose anxieties over anti-Iranian attitudes in the U.S., and fears of the U.S. going to war with Iran in which their families still reside, had come to the surface again. DHS CRCL still has yet to publish its investigation into this despicable discriminatory targeting, and CBP itself has not so much as deleted its tweet lying to the public that no targeting of Iranians was ongoing.

There is also a history of arbitrary visa denials against Iranian students in recent years; dozens have found their visas revoked at their port of departure or were deported upon arrival without proper justification. These deportations upended meticulously planned academic pursuits and brought significant financial strain to families, especially since most had quit their jobs in anticipation of moving and had already spent thousands of dollars—at a time when U.S. sanctions were devastating Iran's economy and contributing to hyperinflation—on travel expenses. One student, Hamid, was looking forward to pursuing a joint Master's and PhD program in engineering when he was stopped at O'Hare airport and sent back to Iran. He told the *New York Times*, "After 24 hours, I was transferred to the boarding gate in the company of two armed officers, as if I was some kind of terrorist. It was both *humiliating and dehumanizing* [emphasis added]."⁹⁹

Over forty years after the Iranian revolution, Iranian Americans continue to fear potential discriminatory immigration policies. With relations between the U.S. and Iran remaining as unstable as ever, anxiety over the impact foreign relations could have on their family members and themselves continues to loom over the minds of the Iranian-American community. The anti-Iran attitudes that have shaped our flawed foreign policy, and contributed to prejudiced immigration policies like the Muslim Ban, have also impacted

95. <https://twitter.com/JohnGhazvinian/status/1213862728798003202?s=20>. Last accessed October 7, 2021.

96. BBC, "Iranian-American's 'Harassed' by US Border Officials," *BBC News*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51011029>.

97. Ryan Devereaux, "U.S. Border Agency Says It's Not Singling Out Iranians. This Family Waited 11 Hours and Was Asked About Iranian Heritage," *The Intercept*, January 5, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/01/06/border-iranian-american-iran/>.

98. Geneva Sands, "Lawmakers Say CBP Admits Breaching Protocol Targeting Iranian Americans," *CNN*, February 4, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/04/politics/cbp-breach-protocol-iranian-americans/index.html>.

99. Caleb Hampton and Caitlin Dickerson, "'Demeaned and Humiliated': What Happened to These Iranians at U.S. Airports," *New York Times*, January 25, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/25/us/iran-students-deported-border.html>.

the experience of Iranian Americans as equal citizens. U.S. policies have at times impacted the community in other adverse ways, all while denigrating their heritage.

Civil Rights

Civil rights encompass a broad range of opportunities and privileges, from voting to receiving a fair trial, which—led by Black Americans—disenfranchised groups in the United States have fought for and continue to mobilize to attain. At its core, however, the protection of civil rights enables people of all backgrounds to participate in society free from the fear of discrimination or mistreatment.

America's adversarial relationship with Iran and the subsequent dehumanization of Iranians have long impacted Iranian-American civil rights. These civil rights violations come in the form of hate crimes and acts of prejudice, discriminatory government policies, and challenges within the private sector.

As anti-Iranian sentiments intensified during the hostage crisis, so did attacks on Iranian nationals and Americans of Iranian heritage. Slogans like "Deport All Iranians" characterized the type of increasingly prevalent hateful rhetoric that Iranian Americans faced.¹⁰⁰ There were even institutional efforts to alienate Iranian immigrants in the 1980s. The Mississippi legislature, for instance, passed a bill later ruled unconstitutional, which raised tuition for students originally from countries the U.S. did not have diplomatic relations with. While it officially applied to students from multiple nations, it was intended for Iranians specifically who had a substantial presence on U.S. campuses. Meanwhile, New Mexico State University attempted to bar Iranians from studying there altogether before that restriction was also deemed unconstitutional.¹⁰¹

Unfortunately, the xenophobia and racism that led to these policies continue to affect the Iranian-American community today as noted in the stories above. With the explosion of anti-Muslim hate crimes following 9/11 and assaults against Muslims in recent years surpassing 2001 levels, it is clear that people of Middle Eastern descent more broadly are at risk of experiencing acts of prejudice in everyday life.¹⁰²

One obstacle to obtaining reliable data on hate crimes and workplace discrimination against Iranian Americans is the ambiguous nature of non-Black Iranian racial and ethnic identity. Despite being considered "white" by the U.S. Census since 1978, Iranian Americans are often seen as non-white in everyday life and vulnerable to the threat of racially motivated hate crimes.¹⁰³ As Iranian-American scholar John Tehranian argues, the effects are manifold and ultimately limit political power:

100. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/ppmsca.09800/>. Last accessed October 8, 2021.

101. Tehranian, John. *Whitewashed: America's Invisible Middle Eastern Minority*. New York: NYU Press, 2010.

102. Katayoun Kishi, "Assaults Against Muslims in U.S. Surpass 2001 Levels," *Pew Research Center*, November 15, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/15/assaults-against-muslims-in-u-s-surpass-2001-level/>.

103. Maghbooleh, Neda. *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017.

"A failure to recognize Middle Easterners as a separate racial group leads to their relative anonymity as a collective social force. In turn, this translates into a lack of means, ability, and resolve to address issues of diversity and discrimination related to them. In a bureaucratic society, invisibility is the worst of punishments and nothing enhances invisibility more than not being counted."¹⁰⁴

Iranian-American racial misclassification also makes it more difficult to defend hate-crime charges or be acknowledged in academic or government research tracking discrimination statistics.

In 2015, for example, 22-year-old Shayan Mazroei was tragically stabbed to death by white supremacist, Craig Tanber, at a bar in Orange County, California. Despite evidence that Tanber yelled a series of racial slurs that night and Tanber's own membership in a white supremacist gang, a hate crime charge was not brought against him. Though the prosecution was seeking a first-degree murder charge, the jury went with second-degree murder and Tanber was sentenced to 56 years to life in prison.¹⁰⁵ Tanber's girlfriend, Elizabeth Thornburg, was also involved in the murder. She started a confrontation with Mazroei, hurled racial epithets, and even spit on him several times before she and Tanber were kicked out of the bar. After lingering outside of the bar for several minutes, Tanber goaded Mazroei to come outside and stabbed him, after which Mazroei stumbled back inside the bar and collapsed.¹⁰⁶ While Thornburg was charged with accessory after the fact, as of this writing—six years after the heinous crime—she is yet to be tried for any crime.

Mazroei was an engineering student at Saddleback College before his untimely death and a beloved member of his community. For an area like Orange County, known for having a significant Iranian-American community, his death came as a great shock and made Iranians in the area more acutely aware of their own vulnerability to such acts of hate. Mazroei's loved ones actively sought hate crime charges to be brought against Tanber to no avail, which only makes finding closure more difficult. The ambiguous status of Iranian Americans within the racial paradigm surely contributed to the fact that a hate crime charge was not pursued by prosecutors. Although the legal grounds for a hate crime charge is not dependent on whether the victim's ethnicity is officially recognized by the Census, less awareness about anti-Iranian sentiments in the United States makes it more difficult to prove racially charged intent in court.

Bigotry against Iranian Americans in the justice system extends beyond hate crimes. In November of 2017, 25-year-old Bijan Ghaisar was killed by U.S. Park Police Officers, Lucas Vinyard and Alejandro Amaya, following a minor traffic collision that evolved into a vehicular pursuit. During the incident, Ghaisar was unarmed and it was later revealed that the officers knew that Ghaisar was not the suspect of the initial crash. Nevertheless, the officers shot Ghaisar ten times that night.¹⁰⁷

104. Tehranian, John (2007) "Compulsory Whiteness: Towards a Middle Eastern Legal Scholarship," *Indiana Law Journal*: Vol, 82: Iss. 1, Article 1. http://ilj.law.indiana.edu/articles/82/82_1_Tehranian.pdf.

105. Alma Fausto and Sean Emery, "White Supremacist Who Fatally Stabbed Man at Laguna Niguel Bar Gets 56 Years to Life," *OC Register*, February 28, 2020, <https://www.ocregister.com/2020/02/28/white-supremacist-who-fatally-stabbed-man-na-at-laguna-niguel-bar-gets-56-years-to-life/>.

106. Todd Spitzer, "Previously Convicted White Supremacist Gang Member Sentenced to 56 Years to Life for Stabbing 22-year-old to Death," *Press Release Orange County District Attorney*, February 28, 2020, <http://orangecountyda.org/civica/press/display.asp?layout=15&Entry=5973>.

107. Tom Jackman, "Park Police Officers Who Killed Bijan Ghaisar Were Told Before Pursuit He Wasn't Suspect in Fender Bender, Recording Shows," *The Washington Post*, August 13, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/08/13/police-told-ghaisar-jeep-struck/>.

Unfortunately, justice has not been served for Ghaisar's killing. Vinyard and Amaya have yet to be held accountable for the murder of Bijan, and the case was shamefully mishandled from the very beginning. Under then-Chief Robert D. MacLean, Park Police "refused to release the officers' names or any information about the slaying and would not discuss it publicly" for two years after Ghaisar's death.¹⁰⁸ Even after these two years passed, officials were slow to release critical information despite pressure from the public and several members of Congress. Beyond leaving loved ones with unanswered questions, MacLean's actions contributed to a marred sense of trust between Park Police and the D.C. community, especially true for Iranian Americans. In an egregious miscarriage of justice, the worst fears of the community were confirmed when a federal judge dismissed all charges against the officers calling their actions "necessary and proper."¹⁰⁹

Some circumstances endured by Iranians in the United States appear straight out of Hollywood films. Such was the case with Sirous Asgari, an Iranian scientist who attended university in the U.S. in the 1990s and has two children that live in the United States, who had planned a trip to the United States to see his family. He was told by the American consulate in Dubai that his visa was finally approved in 2017, despite a recent Trump policy banning Iranians from entering on that type of visa. Upon arriving in the U.S., however, the FBI promptly arrested him over manufactured charges accusing him of theft of trade secrets, visa fraud, and wire fraud—none of which Asgari actually engaged in. The charges, of which he was later acquitted in court,¹¹⁰ turned out to be no more than a tactic to coerce Asgari into spying for the U.S. government.¹¹¹

Such a proposition was not only inappropriate given that Asgari would not be equipped for espionage as a scientist who did not deal with classified information, but also because the conversation itself threatened Asgari's safety upon his return to Iran. After refusing to spy, Asgari was promptly arrested by ICE agents since his visa had been revoked. What he believed was a visa turned out to be, "'Unwitting silent parole,' [which] allows the F.B.I. to issue foreign nationals a document that looks to them like a visa but in fact grants them permission to enter the country only for the Bureau's purposes."¹¹²

Despite planning to self-deport upon the conclusion of his trial, ICE agents hastily took him into custody in 2019. For months, he faced brutal conditions in one detention center after another, even contracting COVID-19 in the process. As he told *The New Yorker*, "Whenever I think I've seen the worst treatment by ICE, they surprise me again."¹¹³ Asgari was finally allowed to return to Iran in June 2020 as part of a possible prisoner exchange between the U.S. and Iran,¹¹⁴ but the effects were long lasting. U.S. officials dealing with Asgari profiled him on account of his Iranian nationality and attempted to use Asgari

108. Tom Jackman, "Interior Dept. Creates Task Force to Study its Police Departments, with Former Park Police Chief as Chair," *The Washington Post*, July 12, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/07/12/interior-dept-police-task-force/>.

109. Tom Jackman, "Judge Dismisses Criminal Charges Against Park Police Officers in Bijan Ghaisar Slaying," *The Washington Post*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/10/22/ghaisar-case-dismissed/>.

110. Eric Heisig, "Cleveland Federal Judge Dismisses Trade Secrets, Fraud Charges Against Iranian Professor During Trial," *Cleveland.com*, November 18, 2019, <https://www.cleveland.com/court-justice/2019/11/cleveland-federal-judge-dismisses-trade-secrets-fraud-charges-against-iranian-professor-during-trial.html>.

111. Laura Secor, "The Man Who Refused to Spy," *The New Yorker*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/09/21/the-man-who-refused-to-spy>.

112. *Ibid.*

113. *Ibid.*

114. Jessica Donati and Sune Engel Rasmussen, "U.S. and Iran Exchange Prisoners in a Deal," *Wall Street Journal*, June 4, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-releases-u-s-navy-veteran-released-after-nearly-2-years-in-custody-11591283272>.

as a tool for espionage. In the process, the FBI and ICE intentionally sought to make things harder for Asgari by manufacturing legal problems for him and engaging in harsh treatment that threatened his life in a global pandemic. Rather than being treated as a human being, Asgari was seen as a mere pawn in U.S. political intrigues.

9/11 dramatically changed what civil rights looked like for Americans of Middle Eastern descent, starting with the PATRIOT Act. The Act provided law enforcement with increased surveillance powers by granting National Security Letters (NSLs) in the name of preventing terrorism, which disproportionately impacted Muslim, South Asian, and Middle Eastern communities. For example, the New York Police Department (NYPD) carried out an extensive surveillance program that undermined personal privacy and racially profiled scores of Muslim New Yorkers, without probable cause, through various methods: mapping areas with high numbers of Muslim populations, camera surveillance, and the presence of undercover police officers and informants at mosques and other areas frequented by local Muslims.¹¹⁵

The PATRIOT Act's implementation by law enforcement agencies across the country highlighted the level of suspicion American officials possessed towards Muslims, which contributed to corresponding fear among Muslim Americans that they could be targeted for cultural practices or political speech regardless of whether their actions would actually merit surveillance. Per the 2007 report entitled "Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat," the NYPD identified several "indicators" that an individual may be in the process of radicalization. Among them was "Giving up cigarettes, drinking, gambling and urban hip-hop gangster clothes" as well as "Wearing traditional Islamic clothing, growing a beard," and "Becoming involved in social activism and community issues."¹¹⁶

This culturally insensitive picture of potential extremists employs dangerous stereotypes about Islam, while its vague characterization of "social activism" opens the potential for Muslim Americans to be targeted for their right to free speech, particularly when it comes to controversial areas of foreign policy or social issues. Of course, these words are both a cause and effect of broader public opinion on Muslims and Middle-Eastern Americans as a whole; misconceptions contributed to the spike in hate crimes among the public and abuses of power by the government.

An ultimately unsuccessful section of a 2005 appropriations bill in the California Senate is another example of the extent that racial profiling and discrimination on account of national origin were seen as acceptable among some sectors of political leadership. The bill sought to prevent nationals from countries like Iran, and others who are not U.S. citizens, from obtaining a drivers license by preventing the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) from accepting, "identity documents issued by a country that has been designated by the United States Secretary of State as a state sponsor of terrorism."¹¹⁷

115. ACLU, "Factsheet: The NYPD Muslim Surveillance Program," *American Civil Liberties Union*, <https://www.aclu.org/other/factsheet-nypd-muslim-surveillance-program>.

116. Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, "Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat," *New York City Police Department*, 2007, https://seths.blog/wp-content/uploads/2007/09/NYPD_Report-Radicalization_in_the_West.pdf.

117. https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=200520060SB60. Last accessed October 8, 2021.

This outrageous and irrational attempted action would have effectively prevented thousands of Californians from achieving basic independence, while doing absolutely nothing to promote national security.

Iranian Americans also experience difficulties navigating complicated and ever-evolving sanction laws that pose serious criminal liabilities if broken, even if on accident. Scientist Mohammad Reza Nazemzadeh, for instance, was “charged in San Diego federal court with conspiracy to export to an embargoed country, conspiracy to smuggle goods, money laundering and obstructing justice” in 2011, after attempting to send an MRI coil to Iran for research purposes.

In doing so, he inadvertently broke sanctions law by failing to apply for a humanitarian license to send such a medical device to Iran. As a result, Nazemzadeh could have been sentenced to decades in prison for a mistake that was intended for medical use. Nazemzadeh was able to get his charges dropped five years later, but not all Iranian Americans in similar situations have been so lucky. Some have faced criminal indictment or even deportation for similar offences. As attorney Erich Ferrari told the *San Diego Tribune*, “a very much misguided belief [that] if you’re not doing something with the government or weapons, no one really is going to care that much” has led some Iranian Americans to mistakenly think that their transactions with Iran will not violate federal law.¹¹⁸

In another high-profile case in 2010, an Iranian American, Mahmoud Reza Banki, was convicted for violating sanctions after receiving money from family members in Iran—a practice which is itself not illegal—via a third party. Banki had actually reported the amount on his tax records, sought the guidance of lawyers and accountants, and even the FBI beforehand. Nonetheless, prosecutors politicized Banki’s case within the broader context of U.S.-Iran relations. Manhattan attorney Preet Bharara stated “our laws recognize a national emergency based upon the threat Iran poses to the security of the United States,” claiming that Banki intentionally violated these laws.¹¹⁹ Bharara essentially implied that Banki, an Iranian-American Ivy league graduate, had some sort of sinister plan with the money transfer despite it being related to a personal family matter. Banki’s charges for sanctions violations were eventually dropped, but he still faced consequences as charges for making false statements to a federal agency remained on his record. He was later pardoned for these charges in 2021 by outgoing President Trump.¹²⁰

As Nazemzadeh and Banki’s respective cases demonstrate, Iranian Americans find themselves at risk of being entangled in complicated international tensions between the U.S. and Iran. As such, it limits their ability to act freely with friends or family members in Iran without fear of reproach—even if their actions come from a perfectly innocent motive and would not be deemed criminal if not for their country of heritage.

118. Kristina Davis, “Scientist Charged in Iran Export Case,” *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, September 5, 2016, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-nazemzadeh-iran-export-sanction-mri-2014mar15-story.html>.

119. Benjamin Weiser, “To Defendant, a U.S. Success Story; to Prosecutors, a Money Broker to Iran,” *New York Times*, May 12, 2010, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/13/nyregion/13hawala.html?_r=0.

120. AP, “Trump Pardons in California Extend to Former Congressman,” *Associated Press*, January 20, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-government-contracts-san-diego-defense-contracts-california-274365d7d58ed3fb51acb2c7ef83382b>.

As a consequence of stringent, ever-changing sanctions on Iran, many major businesses have gone so far as over-complying on sanctions in fear of violating them. For example, major U.S. financial institutions—including Bank of America—routinely and arbitrarily close the accounts of Americans of Iranian heritage with little-to-no notice and despite the lack of any evidence demonstrating that those accounts had violated any sanction policy.¹²¹

These account closures are highly disruptive, and cause significant financial distress to those impacted—from students here on visas to Iranian-American citizens who have never set foot inside Iran. U.S. banks are required by regulatory agencies to routinely examine their customer lists to ensure that they are not servicing sanctioned individuals or individuals ordinarily resident in Iran. While there are warnings against servicing accounts of individuals that may be subject to sanctions, including the prospect of stiff financial penalties, there are no warnings against financial institutions over-enforcing sanctions and routinely shuttering accounts of individuals based on their national heritage. The end result is a pattern of abuse and Iranian Americans and Iranian nationals alike being victimized based on where they were born.

Some financial institutions do engage in good faith and try to appropriately tailor their compliance measures to ensure that Iranian Americans and nationals are not automatically subject to suspicion. For example, Bank of Hawaii—after consulting with NIAC—reopened accounts for Iranian nationals after it had shuttered them in a bid to comply with U.S. sanctions.¹²² However, Bank of America and other major banks remain repeat offenders in discriminatory targeting of Iranian customers, and do not engage in good faith despite repeated appeals from NIAC and the broader community. Likewise, the U.S. Treasury Department has repeatedly failed to act to halt overenforcement of U.S. sanctions and prevent discriminatory account closures.

Popular money-transfer app Venmo is also regularly accused of discrimination against Iranian-American customers because it flags accounts or money transfers that use innocuous keywords associated with Iranian culture such as “Persian,” without any other evidence that these transactions have actually violated sanctions.¹²³ As a result, Iranian Americans have faced problems on an app meant to simplify the money transfer process. This practice of overcompliance is so far-reaching and arbitrary that it has also affected people outside the community, as was the case with staff at *Jewish Currents* whose paychecks were held by PayPal for using the word “Iran” in reference to a published article.¹²⁴

121. NIAC, “NIAC Presses Treasury on Discriminatory Bank Account Closures,” *National Iranian American Council*, February 24, 2020,

https://www.niacouncil.org/press_room/niac-presses-treasury-discriminatory-bank-account-closures/?locale=en

122. NIAC, “Bank of Hawaii Reopens Accounts for Iranians in U.S.,” *National Iranian American Council*, March 11, 2014,

https://www.niacouncil.org/press_room/bank-of-hawaii-re-opens-accounts-for-iranians-in-u-s/?locale=en.

123. NIAC, “NIAC Sends Letter to Venmo and PayPal After Discriminatory Account Freezes,” *National Iranian American Council*, March 17, 2021,

<https://www.niacouncil.org/news/niac-letter-to-venmo-and-paypal-for-freezing-accounts-after-using-keywords/?locale=en>.

124. <https://twitter.com/JewishCurrents/status/1225092121851461632?s=20>. Last accessed October 8, 2021.

But, of course, Iranian Americans both endure the brunt of unjust targeting and the psychological impact of having your identity demonized in such a way. As one Iranian American, Monna Sabouri, told *Newsweek* about Venmo's conduct, "Your identity needs to be flagged...it creates a dent in your heart."¹²⁵ Others have used Twitter as a way to bring attention to these incidents¹²⁶ and condemn what they see as outright discrimination.¹²⁷ When the e-commerce company, Etsy, removed her mother's handmade "Persian dolls" from its platform—under its "Prohibited Items Policy"—Yasmeen Abedi took to social media to express her disappointment.¹²⁸

That something as inoffensive as a doll would be barred is a testimony to the illogical enforcement of U.S. sanctions, as well as the injudicious manner in which the policy is crafted. It is a policy that has, first and foremost, led to the collective punishment of millions of innocent Iranians in Iran, as well as the collective humiliation of Iranian Americans. It cannot be stressed enough that these policies and their unjust consequences have been made possible by a systematic process that has rendered Iranians less than human. The next section of this report looks at what steps can be taken to address specific policies and the state of U.S. discourse on Iran.

125. Daniel Moritz-Rabson, "Venmo Flags Payments for 'Persian' Restaurants, Other Terms Related to Iran Due to Sanctions," *Newsweek*, February 21, 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/venmo-flags-payments-persia-allows-nazis-1339871>.

126. <https://twitter.com/persiancowboy/status/707311204759277568?s=20>. Last accessed October 8, 2021.

127. https://twitter.com/anar_lady/status/707318623967301632?s=20. Last accessed October 8, 2021.

128. <https://twitter.com/yasmeenabedi/status/1214653589651521536?s=20>. Last accessed October 8, 2021.



Recommendations

Looking at the case presented here, it is evident that anti-Iranian attitudes have played a role in how we understand, formulate and execute policies on Iran. Fundamental to addressing the damaging policies that have resulted from this bias is a recognition of the systematic demonization of Iran, as well as the dehumanization of Iranians and, by extension, Americans of Iranian heritage.

By straightforwardly facing the deep-seated historical resentments, misperceptions, Islamophobic caricatures, and anti-Iran sentiments that have colored our views, we can hope to engage in real diplomacy and cooperation that advances U.S. interests and global security aims. In doing so, the U.S. would be taking critical steps to fulfill the vision of its place in the world, as a global leader and truly even-handed broker. Moreover, U.S. policymakers can help to ensure that our policies do not unjustly harm the Iranian-American community, and that all Americans are treated equally in accordance with the values we espouse.

Positive cultural representations of Iranians and Iranian Americans is an important way to counter the flood of negative imagery that has dominated portrayals of Iran and those of Iranian heritage. Award winning Iranian-American author and media personality, Reza Aslan, has spent much of his career focused on this very project of positive representations that more accurately depict the depth of both the Iranian and Muslim community. Additionally, engaging in our democratic process, and building political power for the community across the board, is central to implementing policies that reflect the community's needs and concerns.

Where there have been systematic impacts on the Iranian-American community, now there must be systematic changes and solutions. The following recommendations outline specific policies that should be adopted to further these goals.

Geopolitical

Rejoin the JCPOA and follow through on sanctions lifting commitments. As a landmark non-proliferation agreement, the JCPOA should act as a model for global security and nonproliferation efforts. Despite hawks in Washington who argued that Iran could not be trusted, repeated IAEA reports confirmed Iran's compliance and it was the U.S. that abrogated the deal. The strict limitations set in the deal ensured that Iran could not acquire a nuclear weapon. But one of the most significant breakthroughs of the deal was in the hopeful success of cooperation between the United States and Iran. Returning to the deal is advantageous for numerous reasons, including advancing nuclear non-proliferation work, averting a possible devastating war, rebuilding trust in U.S. promises and, by lifting sanctions inconsistent with the deal, mitigating the humanitarian impact of U.S. sanctions.

Pursue détente with Iran and seek to trade in all sanctions, including the U.S. unilateral embargo, as part of a process to resolve diplomatic tensions. In resolving the nuclear issue with Iran, the U.S. can help open a path to further cooperation with one of the region's central powers. As with the case with the Taliban in Afghanistan and the efforts to defeat ISIS illustrate, the U.S. and Iran have shared goals and mutual interests that would be best undertaken with cooperation from both sides. Détente between the U.S. and Iran can help serve the interest of peace in a region that has been overwhelmed with conflict and instability for decades—in no small part due to U.S. interventions. Just as recent news of Iranian and Saudi diplomatic talks has been welcomed in hopes of helping to end the war in Yemen, easing hostilities between the U.S. and Iran will also serve to further these goals.

Immigration



Pass the NO BAN Act to prevent a Muslim ban from ever being reimposed on the Iranian-American community. Trump's Muslim Ban is rightly recognized as a stain in our history, which flies in the face of the principles that are foundational to the U.S. as a nation, such as religious freedom. Though the U.S. was certainly far from free or equal in its founding, the Muslim Ban was a step backwards from the strides the country has made towards those hopeful ideals for over two centuries. Not only must U.S. lawmakers ensure that Iranian Americans and Muslims are not the target of such hateful policies, but also that no American is treated differently in the eyes of the law based on their race, religion, orientation, gender or otherwise.



Release all documents in unredacted form related to the Trump administration's imposition of all three iterations of the Muslim ban and its corresponding legal defense. In order to begin to reconcile the injustices of the Muslim ban, we must hold those responsible to account. Releasing the documents would allow legal and advocacy experts to map out the creation and execution of the plan and assist efforts to prevent such a ban from being reimposed in the future.



Investigate, punish and atone for abuses of authority that occurred under the Trump administration, including detentions of Iranian Americans at the border, the grotesque Police Park shooting of Bijan Ghaisar and deportations of Iranian students. It is important to note that abuses of authority touch every community in the United States and predate the Trump administration. That being said, in the case of the Iranian-American community there has been no accountability for such abuses at the hands of authorities. To repair the damage that has been done to innocent people and safeguard them from these abuses in the future, those culpable must be held responsible for their actions.



Provide green cards for all diversity visa recipients unjustly barred from securing their promised visa due to Trump bans. Established with the Immigration Act of 1990, the U.S. diversity visa program—also known as the green card lottery—makes thousands of immigrant visas available every year to people around the world. Millions of people apply for the prospect of more opportunities in the United States. Thousands of Iranian Americans have taken this path on their immigrant journey to America. However, as a result of Trump’s Muslim Ban many Iranians were denied the visas they had legally acquired through this familiar process. Barring people who were legally awarded a visa—many of which suffered economic and other hardship since they had prepared for a life-changing move—is just one of the many injustices of the Muslim Ban that must be corrected.



Process the backlogged visa requests and expedite the reunification of Iranian-American families and friends. Stories of families separated by the Muslim Ban became commonplace for the Iranian-American community—like fiancés who have spent years apart in the early stages of their shared-life together, Iranian students who could not see their families out of fear that they would be barred from returning to complete their studies, missed weddings and childbirths, and even parents who could not attend the funeral of their own child in the United States. Beyond the collective trauma of this prejudiced treatment is the individual stories of people separated from their loved ones. U.S. lawmakers must make their reunification a priority as part of their efforts to address the inexcusable effects of the Muslim Ban.

Sanctions

Direct financial institutions to halt discriminatory bank account closures and transaction freezes, which are caused by overcompliance with U.S. sanctions. Iranian Americans have increasingly reported their bank accounts being closed with no clear explanation from banking institutions, as well as account freezes on transaction apps like Venmo. These prejudiced actions have led not only to financial disruptions and strains for Iranian Americans, but also a sense of humiliation and alienation as their identities become targets of discrimination. The U.S. Treasury Department must make clarifications and assurances for financial institutions to bring an end to this unjust practice, as well as examine the issue of overcompliance with their sanctions policy to mitigate these problems.

Open up humanitarian channels with Iran, including direct banking channels that can facilitate remittances and support to family members. Iranian Americans are doubly affected by sanctions by having to helplessly watch as their loved ones are devastated by U.S. sanctions in Iran and being inhibited in their ability to offer support. Addressing the humanitarian impact of sanctions is the responsibility of the U.S. government, first and foremost, because U.S. sanctions cannot be allowed to violate the human rights of any person and their access to humanitarian goods. This issue is all the more pressing in the context of a global crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, U.S. sanctions must not prevent Iranian Americans in their efforts to provide support for their families in Iran from fear of punitive measures by their own government.

Community



Simplify the process to ship mail, small gifts and basic humanitarian goods and medicine to loved ones in Iran. One of the easiest ways to send needed goods and gifts across the world is through the mail. Unfortunately, for Iranian Americans, this process is often complicated with many necessary forms and steps that make mailing things to Iran prohibitive for many people in the Iranian-American community. This is especially true for older Iranian Americans who have more difficulty navigating this process or learning all the steps needed to send mail to Iran. As such, Iranian Americans have reported trouble in shipping items to Iran and had shipments rejected by the United States Postal Service. Like other everyday actions that most Americans take for granted, for Iranian Americans sending mail to their loved ones in Iran presents a labyrinth of hurdles. This process should be simplified to allow the community to send care packages, medicines and other essential goods to their family.



Grant the Iranian-American community minority status under the Small Business Association's 8(a) Business Development Program. Iranian Americans, like other immigrant communities in the United States, have worked to integrate themselves into the social and economic fabric of their home country. While many from the community have excelled as entrepreneurs and helped local economies with small businesses, they have not received the fair benefits of minority status. Of course, Iranian Americans are a numeric minority and have faced serious challenges to their acceptance in the U.S. as equal to their fellow Americans as a consequence of the anti-Iranian attitudes—as well as Islamophobic sentiments—and policies laid out in this report. Despite a narrative of Iranians as a “model minority”—one perpetuated by the community itself in an effort to justify their own sense of worth and belonging—many Iranian Americans struggle economically. As such, Iranian Americans should be afforded the same minority status as other disenfranchised groups, in order to receive similar federal assistance and government resources that have helped other communities.



Consider the best option for counting the Iranian-American community and other Middle Eastern heritage groups in the next national census. According to the Iranian government, the largest diaspora population for Iranians outside of Iran, reside in the United States. Estimates range on the number of Iranian Americans in the U.S. from 500,000 to 1.5 million and even more. While the exact number of Iranian Americans is hard to estimate—due to the fact that the U.S. Census racially categorizes Iranians as “white” and many are hesitant to self-identity as “Iranian” because of the vilification of Iranians in the U.S.—they represent a significant community in America. Having an accurate number for the Census determines things like the number of representatives in Congress, redistricting, planning, and the distribution of federal funding to states and local communities. Additionally, knowing the number of Iranian Americans can help the community exercise its political agency and seek proper representation in the U.S. government.



Conclusion

As this report has outlined, decades of anti-Iran rhetoric in U.S. political discourse, coupled with the demonization of Iran and Iranians in American media and popular culture, have contributed to the systematic dehumanization of an entire people. This process of dehumanization has in turn impacted U.S. policy on Iran, contributing to policies that harm the very people we claim to support and desire to help.

By leading our Iran policy positions with ideological reasoning—colored by deep-seated prejudices—U.S. policymakers have implemented strategies that not only undermine U.S. interests and global security concerns, but that have also demoralized Americans of Iranian heritage. From threatening the diplomatic gains and non-proliferation successes of the Iran Nuclear Deal, to sustaining a sanctions policy that weakens efforts to combat a global health crisis, these policies have been counterproductive to our own aims.

Adding insult to injury, a discourse that is predicated on depriving a group of people their dignity or humanity tarnishes the most valued principles the U.S. routinely promotes. Policies that result in unjustly targeting Americans because of their Iranian heritage are plainly discriminatory and have no place in contemporary American society. The first step in addressing this bias is to acknowledge its existence and promote positive representations of the community and the importance of representation in our political process.

In order to enhance protections against discrimination and bring an end to decades of demonization and tensions, we must treat both the symptoms and the disease. Specific steps have been suggested for U.S. lawmakers to address these symptoms in the realm of immigration and civil rights. However, at the heart of these problematic programs is a foreign policy that has focused its wrath on Iran, erroneously elevated it as a threat, manufactured an avoidable crisis, and employed clear double standards on the international stage.

If the U.S. is to take up the mantle as a world leader, we must act as such. Decisions that risk further destabilization in the Middle East, the continuation of forever wars and the ability of the international community to face global threats, contradict the idea of leadership. If the U.S. is to continue its centuries-long progress towards realizing a vision of equality, then we must face the consequences of demonizing a group of people for political objectives.

Iranian Americans are no less American and no less deserving of the rights promised to all Americans. Moreover, Iranians are no less human, and deserve serious considerations on policies with humanitarian impacts and which devastate their livelihoods.

Central to changing these policies, however, is a change in outlook. As long as we conceive of Iran as a certain enemy and its people as antagonists, we will continue to seek policies in similarly black and white terms. As long as this vilification continues, Iranian Americans will be treated as an “other” in the country they call home.