

Diaspora in the Age of Globalization: A Case Study of the Iranian Diaspora in the United States

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Abstract

Diaspora, defined as the dispersion of a nation's population beyond the borders of its homeland, has assumed heightened significance in the era of globalization. The expansion of global communication networks has enabled migrant communities to maintain strong cultural, identity-based, and political connections with their country of origin, empowering them as transnational actors in international relations. The Iranian diaspora—particularly in the United States—is one of the most prominent Iranian expatriate communities, with over one million individuals of Iranian descent residing in the U.S., many of whom emigrated following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. This study investigates the political role of the Iranian diaspora in the United States within the context of globalization. The central research question is: how does the Iranian diaspora function as a transnational political actor, and how can this role be interpreted through the lens of globalization? The research assumes that diasporic identity, when sustained over generations, can mobilize political engagement, especially when paired with access to soft power resources such as elite networks, economic capital, and cultural influence. Findings indicate that the Iranian-American diaspora has transitioned from decades of political disengagement to becoming an increasingly vocal and organized actor influencing U.S. policy toward Iran. Through lobbying efforts, media advocacy, and civic participation, it has helped shape narratives and policy agendas. However, internal divisions and fragmented identities remain obstacles to unified political influence.

Keywords: Diaspora, globalization, dual identity, soft power, transnationalism, Iranian-American diaspora.

Introduction

The phenomenon of "diaspora," originally used to describe the historical dispersion of communities such as Jews and Armenians, has now become a key concept in the study of migration and globalization. Diaspora refers to ethnic or national groups that, due to various historical, political, or economic reasons, have been dispersed from their homeland and have settled in host countries, yet continue to maintain spiritual, cultural, and identity-based ties with their country of origin. In the age of globalization, the significance of diaspora has grown increasingly prominent. Globalization—characterized by the compression of time and space and the expansion of communication networks—has created conditions in which diasporic communities are able to maintain active and ongoing connections with one another and with their homeland, despite geographical distance. Through tools such as the internet, satellite media, and social networks, members of diasporic communities can now redefine their collective identity and participate in the social and political developments of both their countries of origin and settlement. Diaspora is no longer merely a passive migrant group on the margins of host societies; rather, as some scholars suggest, it has become a "transnational actor" and even a source of soft power capable of influencing politics and international relations (Kumar Khara, 2020, p. 13).

On the other hand, theories of cultural and political identity help us understand why and how diasporic communities strive to preserve and reconstruct their identities. According to scholars such as Stuart Hall, identity in the modern world is not a fixed or predetermined entity, but rather a fluid and continuously evolving construct that is redefined through interaction with various factors (Hall, 1990, pp. 222-237). In the context of diaspora, individual identity is shaped at the intersection of the homeland and the host country. Members of diasporic communities perceive themselves as belonging to both worlds simultaneously, and this dual orientation can be a source of cultural richness and empowerment. Globalization has accentuated this dual identity and provided greater means for its expression—especially in light of the discourse of multiculturalism in Western societies, which encourages immigrants to preserve their cultural roots while also integrating into their new social environment.

Among diasporic communities, the Iranian diaspora stands out as one of the most significant and widely studied cases. Iranian migration to various parts of the world intensified particularly after

the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and today, the Iranian expatriate community numbers in the millions. According to official statistics published by Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2018, over four million Iranians reside outside the country. A substantial portion of this population is settled in Western countries, with the United States serving as the most prominent host nation for Iranian migrants. Iranian Americans, whose population has been estimated at approximately 1.5 million by Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, constitute the largest subset of the global Iranian diaspora (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2018).

This community largely emerged after 1979 and is concentrated in states such as California (particularly Los Angeles), New York, and Texas. Iranian immigrants in the United States are considered among the most successful migrant minorities in terms of education and economic status. Studies show that Iranian Americans possess exceptionally high levels of educational attainment and enjoy a remarkable average income (Migration Policy Institute, 2021). Nevertheless, a prominent presence in academic and economic arenas has not necessarily translated into political participation. For many years, the Iranian-American community was known for its political disengagement and relative isolation from civic affairs. Evidence suggests that in the early decades following migration, Iranians residing in the United States showed little inclination to engage in civic and political life in their host country, focusing instead on cultural and economic pursuits (Naficy, 1993; Kelley, Friedlander, & Colby, 1993).

Several factors may explain this lack of engagement, including the first-generation immigrants' emphasis on rebuilding their lives and achieving professional success in exile, as well as a lingering sense of distrust and fear shaped by Iran's political climate, which fostered caution and political withdrawal. Moreover, the absence of structured mechanisms for political mobilization among Iranian Americans, along with the lack of a unified voice within the community, further limited their political participation. Gradually, however, with the emergence of a second generation of Iranian immigrants who were raised in the United States and more familiar with its political culture—as well as in response to key developments in U.S.-Iran relations—a process of political awakening began to gain momentum within the Iranian diaspora. Over the past two decades, the formation of civic and political organizations by Iranians residing in the U.S. has contributed to an increased level of community engagement. Furthermore, domestic developments in Iran—from the student and

reform movements of the late 1990s, to the "Green Movement" of 2009, and the recurrent protests of the 2010s and early 2020s—have had a significant resonance among Iranians abroad, drawing many into political activism.

As a result, the Iranian diaspora in the United States has increasingly emerged as a recognized political actor, particularly in matters related to Iran. This transformation is evident across several domains: from lobbying and influencing U.S. policy toward Iran, to efforts aimed at reshaping public perceptions of Iran in the media, as well as activities framed as "defending human rights in Iran." Based on the above theoretical review, the framework of this study is founded on four conceptual pillars: (1) diasporic identity, (2) transnationalism in the age of globalization, (3) soft power, and (4) the role of diaspora in politics. The interaction of these concepts can help explain the behavior and political role of the Iranian diaspora in the United States.

1. Iranian Diaspora Politics in the United States

The Iranian diaspora in the United States is the result of several waves of migration—pre-revolutionary student migration, post-revolutionary political exile, the emigration of minorities in the 1980s, and the migration of academic elites in the 1990s and 2000s—which together have formed a diverse population characterized by high levels of education and professional skills. The earliest recorded presence of Iranians in America dates back to the early 17th century, but until the mid-20th century, the number of Iranians remained very small, consisting mainly of merchants, diplomats, and students. A turning point in the history of the Iranian diaspora was the 1979 Islamic Revolution. With the fall of the Pahlavi regime and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, a wave of political and economic migration was set in motion. Many affiliates of the former regime, educated elites, artists, entrepreneurs, and others discontent with the revolutionary changes left Iran. Due to its previously close ties with Iran and the presence of small pre-existing Iranian communities, the United States became one of the primary destinations for these migrants (OIAC, 2018). In the early years following the revolution, tens of thousands of Iranians sought refuge in the U.S. During the 1990s and 2000s, Iranian migration to the United States continued, though its nature shifted somewhat compared to earlier periods. In addition to political asylum seekers, this era witnessed a rise in economic migrants and, in particular, an increase in the migration of academic

and scientific elites. Many Iranian students and professionals who came to the U.S. for education or employment chose to remain (Bagherpour, 2010). As a result, the demographic composition of the Iranian diaspora increasingly consisted of highly educated and skilled individuals who also achieved professional success in their new environment. According to the Migration Policy Institute, by the early 2020s, the United States hosted the largest population of Iranian migrants in the world, with over half of all Iranian expatriates residing there (Migration Policy Institute, 2021). In terms of geographic distribution, approximately 400,000 to 620,000 Iranian Americans reside in California, with a significant concentration in the Los Angeles metropolitan area (UCLA, 2023). Other major population centers include the metropolitan areas of New York, Washington, D.C., Texas, and Northern California. These concentrations have provided the foundation for the development of Iranian social, cultural, and economic institutions.

One of the essential prerequisites for the political influence of any immigrant community is the existence of collective and organized institutions. In the final two decades of the 20th century, a growing number of organizations and associations were established by Iranians in the United States, pursuing diverse objectives—from preserving Iranian culture and identity, to assisting newcomers, engaging in charitable activities, and, importantly, participating in political actions to defend the rights and interests of Iranians. While many associations founded in the 1980s and 1990s were primarily cultural and social in nature, the 2000s witnessed the emergence of organizations that formally engaged in political and civic affairs. The National Iranian American Council (NIAC), founded in 2002, is perhaps the most well-known Iranian-American civil rights and lobbying organization based in Washington, D.C. (Influence Watch, n.d). Its stated mission is to "build political power for the Iranian-American community to advance peace & diplomacy, secure equitable immigration policies, and protect the civil rights of all Americans" (NIAC Council, n.d). Over the years, NIAC has become one of the most influential groups advocating for diplomacy with Iran through congressional meetings, professional lobbying, and grassroots campaign organizing. The Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA), founded in 2007, was established with the aim of representing and empowering the Iranian-American community (PAAIA, 2023). PAAIA focuses primarily on promoting a positive image of Iranians in the United States and encouraging civic

participation, and it operates a Political Action Committee (PAC) that financially supports electoral candidates aligned with its goals. In recent years, alongside protest movements in Iran, new groups have emerged within the diaspora that explicitly organize around opposition to the Islamic Republic. These include entities such as the Alliance for Human Rights in Iran and the National Solidarity Council of Iranians. For instance, during the 2022 protests, a coalition called the National Solidarity Group for Iran was formed in Washington, D.C., aiming to coordinate diaspora activism in support of the demonstrations (Atlantic Council, 2024). In addition to these, dozens of Iranian associations are active across the United States, including professional and specialized associations, student-based organizations, religious institutions, and cultural organizations. Although these institutions are not directly political, they have collectively contributed to the cohesion of the Iranian community and the enhancement of its social capital—both of which are essential prerequisites for political engagement.

One of the most important arenas of political engagement for the Iranian diaspora in the United States is influencing U.S. policy toward Iran. Immigrant communities in the U.S., when sufficiently organized and influential, can impact American foreign policy toward their countries of origin through lobbying and political participation. In the years following 2001, the issue of Iran moved to the forefront of U.S. foreign policy. At that time, the Iranian-American community lacked a unified voice, and U.S. policy was largely shaped by other influences. The earliest lobbying efforts by Iranian Americans focused on preventing a potential war and lifting unnecessary restrictions. For example, amid congressional debates over comprehensive sanctions on Iran, a group of Iranian Americans succeeded in highlighting the humanitarian consequences of severing financial ties, resulting in humanitarian exemptions for items such as medicine and food being included in the sanctions legislation (The Huffington Post, 2012). A major turning point occurred during the presidency of Barack Obama, when Iranian-American organizations such as NIAC launched a broad campaign in support of the nuclear negotiations and the subsequent Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. This campaign involved providing expert analysis to Congress, securing signatures from hundreds of university professors and Iranian-American figures in support of the agreement, and directly contacting lawmakers to urge them to vote in favor (Global Voices, 2023). In contrast, the presidency of Donald Trump (2017–2020) proved to be a major challenge. The diaspora reacted

strongly to the "travel ban"; 76 percent of Iranian Americans opposed the order and viewed it as discriminatory. Iranian organizations quickly filed lawsuits in court and organized protests in multiple cities across the U.S. against the ban. A 2019 PAAIA survey showed that 75 percent of Iranian Americans viewed Trump's Iran policy negatively, and nearly 70 percent reported having been personally affected by the travel ban (PAAIA, 2019). With the inauguration of Joe Biden in 2021, hopes for a renewed diplomatic path were revived. However, the protests of 2022—sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini—shifted the focus and strategy of diaspora lobbying efforts. Iranian Americans organized demonstrations in multiple U.S. cities and called for action in response to the protests. These efforts resulted in the passage of several resolutions and legislative measures in support of Iranian protesters, including the so-called MAHSA Act, which imposed heightened human rights sanctions on Iranian officials. The passage of this law in the U.S. Congress in April 2023 was largely the result of vigorous lobbying by Iranian Americans (Atlantic Council, 2024).

Another dimension of the Iranian diaspora's political role is direct participation in the political processes of the United States. This includes activities such as voting in elections, involvement in political parties, employment in government positions, or running for elected office. For many years after the formation of the Iranian-American community, their rate of political participation was below the national average. However, beginning in the 2000s, second-generation Iranian Americans and more assimilated members of the first generation began increasing their level of participation. A 2019 PAAIA survey indicated that Iranian Americans have shown a marked preference for Democratic candidates. In the 2016 election, approximately 56 percent voted for Hillary Clinton, and the same survey projected that by the 2020 election, 69 percent of Iranian Americans would vote for the Democratic nominee (PAAIA, 2020). Another important indicator is the presence of individuals of Iranian descent in governmental and elected positions. Until the mid-2010s, no Iranian American had been elected to the U.S. Congress. The first significant breakthrough occurred in 2020, when Stephanie Bice, a Republican, was elected as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Oklahoma. She is the granddaughter of an Iranian immigrant and is considered the first person of Iranian heritage to serve in Congress (Iran Press, 2020). At the state and local levels, several Iranian-American politicians had already held public office, including Anna Kaplan in the New York State Senate,

Cyrus Habib, who served as Lieutenant Governor of Washington State, and various mayors and city council members in California. Although these cases remain relatively few, they carry significant symbolic importance. Over the years, a considerable number of Iranian-American professionals have worked in various U.S. government departments, particularly in the Departments of State and Treasury. From another perspective, the Iranian diaspora's direct engagement with American politicians has also increased. Annual gatherings featuring members of Congress, the collective signing and submission of letters by hundreds of Iranian-American academics and professionals to the White House, and the formation of congressional "Friends of Iran" groups are among the efforts undertaken (BBC Persian, 2015). All of these developments indicate that the Iranian diaspora is gradually transforming from a politically marginalized community into an integral part of the American political fabric. For example, in the case of the freezing of Iranian students' bank accounts in 2013–2014, it was political pressure from the Iranian-American community that prompted intervention by lawmakers and led to the restoration of the students' accounts (Civil Beat, 2014). Similarly, in 2022, regarding the issue of facilitating visas for Iranian family members, PAAIA lobbied Congress to establish a humanitarian visa program for elderly relatives of Iranian Americans (Idea Space, 2022).

Despite these achievements, the Iranian-American community faces several challenges and weaknesses. First, the community is not politically homogeneous. A wide range of political orientations exists among migrants, and these divisions have at times neutralized collective efforts. A notable example is the failure of the so-called Solidarity Council in 2023, which collapsed due to personal and strategic disagreements (Atlantic Council, 2023). Second, due to the political orientations of the diaspora, the relationship between Iranian Americans and the Islamic Republic of Iran has never been marked by full trust. The lack of mutual trust has led the Iranian government to refrain from developing a coherent strategy for close engagement with the diaspora in the United States or leveraging their potential. Third, certain U.S. laws have also impacted the political activities of the diaspora. For instance, the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) requires any group that primarily lobbies on behalf of a foreign government or entity to register accordingly (Library of Congress, 2024). Additionally, U.S. sanctions have significantly complicated financial transactions—making it nearly impossible for Iranian Americans to send financial support to civil

society organizations inside Iran (NIAC Council, 2014). Fourth, stronger lobbies—such as AIPAC for Jewish Americans or the Cuban-American lobby—have a history spanning over 50 years, whereas the Iranian-American lobby is less than two decades old. As such, it is still in a developmental phase, learning through trial and error and requiring more time to fully mature (Azizi, 2024).

2. From Dual Identity to Soft Power

The case study of the Iranian diaspora in the United States clearly demonstrates how globalization enables migrant communities to become influential transnational actors. In light of the study's theoretical framework, the findings can be summarized across four interconnected dimensions: diasporic identity, transnationalism and global networks, soft power, and political influence in U.S. politics.

From the perspective of diasporic identity, the Iranian-American community serves as an example in which dual identity has become not an obstacle, but a catalyst for engagement with the homeland's fate. A sense of belonging to Iran—albeit often an imagined and idealized Iran—has led many to consider themselves responsible for developments in their country of origin, despite living comfortable lives in the United States, and to devote their time and energy to political activism. At the same time, their American identity and familiarity with democratic values in the U.S. political system have prompted them to use civic tools—such as voting, lobbying, and peaceful protest—to express their demands, rather than resorting to violent methods. The combination of these two identity dimensions has produced a conscious citizen-migrant who utilizes the freedoms and security of the American context to pursue ideals they deem worthy. The "hyphen theory," which refers to life in an in-between space, is applicable here: Iranian Americans act as a bridge between two worlds and have succeeded in exchanging narratives and values across both. From this standpoint, diasporic identity has not only been preserved but politicized—transformed into a dynamic element of collective action.

Regarding transnationalism and global networks, Iranian migrants have utilized transnational networks to respond to and influence events in Iran in real time. These responses have manifested in the form of demonstrations in various countries—actions that would not have been possible without the internet and social media. Globalization has blurred the line between inside and outside. The impact of this was evident during the protests known as "Woman, Life, Freedom." This alignment was the result of rapid

communication networks and a shared sense of destiny. It is a reality that the diaspora has become a political agent in the international arena.

In light of the concept of soft power, the case of the Iranian diaspora demonstrates that a country's soft power is not necessarily exercised by its government; rather, its people—even those living abroad—can serve as carriers of that power. Iranian Americans, including doctors, entrepreneurs, and engineers, have projected the image of a successful community, which can positively influence American perceptions of Iran. In other words, they have emerged as cultural ambassadors of Iran in the United States. Such activities, alongside individual achievements, have generated symbolic capital for the Iranian community. In political negotiations, this soft capital complements bargaining power. Iranian groups, by relying on their social credibility and professional networks, have managed to gain the trust of certain policymakers. Soft power has also manifested in the form of personal relationships. Many Iranians in academic and business environments are closely connected with American elites, and these informal networks influence elite perceptions. However, the utilization of the diaspora's soft power by the Iranian state has been limited, due to a prevailing atmosphere of mistrust between the government and the diaspora.

In terms of the role in U.S. politics, the findings indicate a generational shift in the political participation of Iranian Americans. Just a generation ago, the idea of an Iranian serving in Congress—or even on a city council—seemed far-fetched, but it has now become a reality. Although gradual and quiet, the Iranian-American community has moved from political silence to securing political seats. The tangible impact of this growing political presence is that Iranians are no longer an absent group in American politics. From this perspective, the diaspora has succeeded in moderating certain discriminatory or unjust policies to the benefit of the Iranian-American community. Nonetheless, caution is warranted. The Iranian diaspora is still in the early stages of political influence. Its political weight in Washington's broader strategic calculations remains limited compared to state actors. For example, in determining the future of the JCPOA or shaping U.S. policy toward Iran's nuclear program, America's strategic interests and the influence of Zionist Regime and Arab states have outweighed the voice of the diaspora. Still, that voice is present—and it can no longer be ignored.

The findings support perspectives that acknowledge the growing role of non-state actors in international relations. Diaspora

communities are now recognized as players alongside states and international organizations. This marks a transformation in traditional political science, which historically regarded states as the sole primary units of analysis. Additionally, the theory of soft power is reinforced by the case study of the Iranian diaspora. Soft power can be mobilized through migrant networks and is not limited to state-driven instruments.

Conclusion

In the age of globalization, migration no longer merely signifies a rupture from the homeland; rather, it can give rise to dynamic transnational communities that operate beyond borders. The Iranian diaspora in the United States is a clear example of such a community—one that has preserved its Iranian identity while integrating into the political and social fabric of American society, and now plays a tangible role in shaping U.S.-Iran relations. This study has shown how the political role of the Iranian diaspora in the U.S. has evolved over four decades, moving from the margins to the center. Iranian Americans, by establishing lobbying and civil organizations, working to reshape the public image of Iran, and increasingly participating in America's democratic processes, have succeeded in making their voices heard by policymakers and the broader public. They have acted as cultural and political bridges and have played influential roles during critical historical junctures—such as nuclear negotiations and protest movements. These achievements can be explained within the framework of theories of identity, diaspora, globalization, and soft power. The dual Iranian-American identity has become a driver of loyalty and activism; global communication networks have enabled transnational engagement; and the soft power derived from human and cultural capital has turned into a lever of influence. From the perspective of transnationalism and global networks, the Iranian diaspora has clearly demonstrated how political agency in the contemporary era can transcend geographical borders. Iranians residing in the United States, by leveraging the capacities of social networks, global media, and digital communication, have been able to operate simultaneously in two spheres of social and political activity: one within the public space of the United States to garner the sympathy and support of civil institutions and public opinion, and the other in solidarity with civil and freedom-seeking demands beyond national borders. This transnational activism is the result of globalization and the compression of time and space, which enables migrants to be both active participants in ongoing developments and intermediaries between local communities and global discourses.

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