

A FRAGMENTED DIASPORA: *Iranians in Sweden*

Abstract

The notion of diaspora generally indicates achievements: creating a home outside the homeland, entrepreneurship, the establishment of local and global networks, new organisations, media and spatial as well as social mobility. In studies of Iranian diaspora, a rosy picture of 'super successful' Iranians has often obscured other aspects of the diaspora — failure, conflicts, internal exclusion and fragmentation of the group along various lines, such as ideologies, class, gender, local identification and cause of migration. Through ethnographic vignettes of the Iranian migrants in Sweden, this article demonstrates the segmentation, hybridity and complexity of the experiences of the diaspora. Avoiding the language of generalisation and by focussing instead on particular histories and individual circumstances, it reveals the diversity, disintegration and contradictions within what has been assumed to be a homogeneous and static diaspora.

Keywords

Sweden • Iranians • Segmented diaspora • Internal diversity • Refugees

Received 28 November 2016; Accepted: 23 November 2017

Introduction

I start with an ethnographic description of a funeral ceremony at a small cemetery beside a church in Northwestern Stockholm on a cold snowy Wednesday in March 1998. It was the funeral for Bahram, who had passed away a week earlier at the age of 65 years. Bahram and his wife migrated to Sweden from Iran in 1994 to reunite with their children, who had been in Sweden since the mid-1980s. One of Bahram's sons was a US resident, but his other five children lived in Sweden. In addition to his children, Bahram's daughters-in-law and sons-in-law were present at his funeral. One of his sons-in-law was a Swede, while another was Dutch. His eldest son, who had come from the USA, was accompanied by his American wife. Bahram's children were devoted Marxists and had come to Sweden as political refugees. Unlike their mother who insisted on having a conventional Islamic ceremony for her husband, Bahram's children were explicitly against Islam and opposed to an Islamic funeral ceremony. She was the only family member dressed in black at the funeral. Although there is a large Muslim cemetery close to the church in Northwestern Stockholm, the children preferred to bury their father in a coffin in a churchyard. Bahram's wife had brought a tape recorder to play verses from the Quran but she was stopped when her son took the batteries out of the tape recorder. Likewise, the children declined the idea of inviting an Iranian *ghari*, a Muslim priest, to conduct the Islamic burial rituals. After a long discussion, however, they agreed

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to bring a Turkish *ghari* to conduct the ceremony. The Turkish *ghari*'s recitation of the Quran and his presentation were unfamiliar and were cut short by one of Bahram's daughters, who started to read Persian poems from Hafez (a 14th-century poet). Finally, coordination of the lowering of the coffin was conducted in three languages: Persian, English and Swedish. The funeral ended, in a very Western style, after Bahram's children each said a few words about their father while standing next to his grave. Afterwards, all were invited to a reception at a nearby Iranian restaurant with the huge neon sign over the entrance reading: *Alborz Nightclub*.

The funeral was not only hybrid but also contested, just like the Iranian diaspora, i.e. fragmented along various lines, such as ideology, class, gender, local identification, sexuality and the cause of migration. I began with the short ethnographic snapshot of one example of internal divergence, i.e. between religiosity and secularism, to show the complexity and segmentation of what is assumed to be a homogeneous bounded entity. Following Rogers Brubaker, I approach the Iranian diaspora in Sweden as a category of practices, stances and claims. As indicated by Brubaker:

[R]ather than speak of 'a diaspora' or 'the diaspora' as an entity, a bounded group, an ethnodemographic or ethnocultural fact, it may be more fruitful, and certainly more precise, to speak of diasporic stances, projects, claims, idioms, practices, and so on. We can then study empirically the degree and form of support for

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a diasporic project among members of its putative constituency, just as we can do when studying a nationalist project. (Brubaker 2005:13)

The funeral, as an allegory of the diaspora, can be understood 'not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity, diversity, and hybridity' (Hall 1990: 235). Approaching the concept of diaspora in this way challenges the fixed and conventional perception of diasporic identity frozen in static homogeneous national units (see Brah 1996; Mavroudi 2007; Werbner 2004).

Through ethnographic vignettes, this article provides glimpses into a fragmented and contested diaspora. After presenting the main features of Iranian migrants in Sweden, in the second part of this article, I will demonstrate the segmentation, hybridity and complexity of Iranians' experiences. Following Abu-Lughod (1991) in her call for 'writing against culture', rather than writing *about* culture, this article aims to avoid the language of generalisation and instead focusses on particular histories and individual circumstances to illustrate diversity, disintegration and contradictions within what is assumed to be a homogeneous and static diaspora.

The data on which this study is based is a part of a larger ethnography study of the Iranian community in Stockholm, which I have been carrying out since 1996. Throughout my research, I have practised what Hugh Gusterson (1997: 39) calls 'polymorphous engagement', i.e. 'interacting with informants across a number of dispersed sites, not just in local communities, and sometimes in virtual form; and it means collecting data eclectically from a disparate array of sources in many different ways.' My data collection includes various forms of interviews and conventional participant observation. I have interviewed migrants, artists, filmmakers, writers, businessmen and women, journalists and activists. The mobile and multiply situated character of migrants makes the field of such studies often necessarily multi-sited. To explore the transnational space in which Iranian migrants are interconnected and are simultaneously 'territorialised' in at least two or more countries, my ethnographic investigation became gradually multi-sited, conducted in geographically dispersed places, yet intensively interrelated. Apart from my work in Stockholm, I have carried out shorter fieldworks in other main hubs of the Iranian diaspora, namely Los Angeles, Toronto and Kuala Lumpur. I have examined the infrastructure of migration, ethnic business among Iranians (Khosravi 1999), their political mobilisation and activity (Graham & Khosravi 2002), migrant 'illegality' (Khosravi 2010), Iranian return migration (Graham & Khosravi 1997) and masculinity (Khosravi 2009). Furthermore, I have also conducted fieldworks in Tehran since 1999, examining consumption practices as well as precarity and marginalisation among young Iranians. To get insight into the dynamic and erratic characteristics of a diaspora, it is important to follow it over a longer period of time and the fieldwork must be multi-local, including the country of origin.

Iranian Migration to Sweden

Over the past 4 decades, there has been a dynamic and mixed migration flow of Iranians to Sweden, which has included asylum migration, irregular migration, family reunification, labour migration and student migration. According to the census of 2016, the Iranian group in Sweden (by country of birth) numbered slightly more than 70,000 (Statistiska centralbyrån [SCB] 2016). Of these, 52% were men and 48% women. Until the 1979 Revolution, Iranians in Sweden

Table 1. Number of Iranians admitted, according to refugee convention, based on humanitarian reasons, de facto refugees or as war-rejecters (1980–2014)

Year	Number
1980 – 1989	27,363
1990 – 1999	11,002
2000 – 2009	4,750
2010 – 2014	3,494
Total	46,609

Source: Swedish Migration Board (2015).

Table 2. Number of skilled labour migrants admitted from Iran, 2000–2014

Year	Number
2000 – 2005	310
2006 – 2010	1,070
2011– 2014	2,376
Total	3,756

Source: Swedish Migration Board (2015).

were mainly guest students, with the population estimated to be around 2,000. The 1979 Revolution, the outbreak of the war between Iran and Iraq as well as the violent oppression of political dissidents caused a huge migration to Western countries, including Sweden. The Iranian migration to Sweden, mainly in the form of asylum migration, peaked during the second half of the 1980s. The ceasefire between Iran and Iraq in 1989, as well as a harsher Swedish asylum policy beginning in the early 1990s, reduced the number of Iranians admitted as refugees (see Table 1).

Despite the decrease of asylum migration in the early 1990s, Iranians continued to move to Sweden, mainly for family reunifications or as skilled labourers or students. In the 2000s, due to changes in the Swedish migration policy, which became more favourable towards skilled migrants than towards asylum migrants, a new flow of migration of Iranians began. As indicated in Table 2, prior to the year 2000, the number of skilled labour migrants from Iran was small. Between 2000 and 2014, the skilled labour migration of Iranians to Sweden increased more than sevenfold.

Alongside skilled labour migration, there has been a recent inflow of Iranians seeking education. The free university education in Sweden, which was available until 2010, attracted to Sweden several thousand Iranians hoping to obtain higher education. From the mid-2000s, the number of Iranian student-migrants in Sweden increased considerably. While between 1986 and 2003, only 422 Iranians came to Sweden as students, between 2004 and 2014, this number increased more than 15 times, to 6,364 (Swedish Migration Board 2015). The recent increase in the flow of student and professional migration has played a significant role in making the Iranian community in Sweden more diverse and contested.

'Integration means Iranians'

This was the answer a young Turkish woman gave a television (TV) journalist in 2010 who had asked her, 'What does integration

mean?' There is a general belief that Iranians in Sweden are easily 'integratable' into the host society. This public imagination is partly accurate since the social and economic context Iranians come from is not very different from the Swedish one. Iranian migrants in Sweden come mostly from the urban middle class and are well educated. They prefer living in cities and show preference for spatial integration. More than 36% of all Iranians in Sweden (born in Iran) live in Greater Stockholm. Another 17% live in Göteborg (Kelly 2013:171). Unlike many other migrant groups, Iranians do not live in an enclave. For instance, compared with the Turkish community in Greater Stockholm, Iranians live in less ethnically segregated neighbourhoods. While 84% of Turks in Greater Stockholm are concentrated in five municipalities, the corresponding figure for Iranians is 10 municipalities.

Iranians easily fit the image of 'good migrants', i.e. spatially integrated, well educated and entrepreneurial. Iranians are one of the most educated migrant groups in Sweden. Young Iranians, more than any other group (including Swedes), attend university (SCB 2011). However, higher education does not necessarily open the door to the labour market for Iranians. Discrimination in the labour market pushes Iranians towards business, in which success has proven more likely (Khosravi 1999; see also Ohlsson, Broomé & Bevelander 2012). Another feature that contributes to the image of Iranians as 'good migrants' is the belief that Iranians are secular. Most of the Iranians left their country not only because of war or political persecution but also because of the increasingly dominant religious culture of everyday life. Well educated, and bearers of a secular mass culture, many Iranians found themselves in an alien atmosphere in post-revolutionary Iran. Perhaps experiences from living under an Islamic theocracy in the homeland plays a significant role in the emergence of not only a strong secularism but also a widespread Islamophobia among Iranians (see Gholami 2015). Iranians in Sweden are very active in anti-Muslim organisations and networks. Anti-Islamic sentiments are palpable both among right-wing and left-wing Iranians. Iranians with a background with the Worker-communist Party of Iran have established the Ex-Muslim Organisation (also found in several other European countries, including the Netherlands and the UK), which has contributed to normalising anti-Muslim rhetoric and sentiments in Swedish society. In protests against the building of mosques, members of the Worker-communist Party of Iran stood side by side with Swedish xenophobic groups. Two members of the Swedish Parliament born in Iran, Amineh Kakabaveh (Left Party) and Hanif Bali (the Moderate Party), have been active and explicit in their anti-Islam statements more than any other members of the Parliament. A graphic example of this bizarre symbiosis was when the Iranian flag was flown next to the flag of the English Defence League (EDL) at an event in Stockholm in August 2012. The Iranian flag has also been seen occasionally at demonstrations of the Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West (PEGIDA) in Oslo.

Disassociating oneself from those who are regarded as 'different', e.g. Muslims, is an attempt to increase the potential for integration through 'performing whiteness' (see Khosravi 2012). While there is a historical and widespread white identification among Iranians, they are categorised and treated as non-white in their everyday experiences in Europe or the USA. As Maghbouleh (2017), in her study of Iranian Americans' complex and contradictory relationship to the issue of race, puts it, Iranians live a racial paradox at the limits of whiteness. Believing in their own whiteness, successfully responding to the demands of the host society and taking on the role of 'model minority', Iranians find themselves still treated as non-white. A survey

in Sweden from 2013 shows that attitudes towards Iranians are more negative (e.g. experienced cultural distance) than attitudes towards other migrant groups (Jonsson *et al.* 2013). Like Iranian Americans in Maghbouleh's study, many Iranians in Sweden experience a racial perplexity because while their socioeconomic performance is as successful as that of the whites, they are culturally categorised as non-white by the host society.

The snapshot of Bahram's funeral in the beginning of this article is one example of the widespread anti-Islamic attitude among Iranian migrants. Unlike in Toronto or Los Angeles, where religiosity is visible, Iranian Muslims in Sweden attempt to hide their religious faith and religious practices to protect themselves from stigmatisation, exclusion and threats by other Iranians (see also Gholami 2015). This hegemonic anti-Islam discourse among Iranians in Sweden contributes to the segmentation of the diaspora. The anti-Muslim sentiments among Iranians have deepened the gap between diasporic stances, as well as the references to the homeland where Islam plays a significant role in society and culture. Thus, the diasporic stances become less connected to the homeland and more absorbed by other discourses and ideologies, thereby making diaspora less diasporic over time.

Visibility of Success and Invisibility of Failure

During the past decade, the Iranian group became more visible in the host society due to the emergence of a creative and vigorous second generation working in various areas of entrepreneurship, art, journalism, literature, academia and politics. Iranians have been one of the most active migrant groups in the arena of Swedish politics. Perhaps it is not unexpected since the large number of political refugees, mostly leftists, has made the Iranian group in Sweden one of the most politicised communities within the Iranian diaspora (Hajighasemi 2012; Kelly 2013). In the 2014 general election, for a seat in the *Riksdag* (parliament), more than 50 candidates were first- or second-generation Iranians representing various political parties. Seven of them were elected, compared to the 2010 general election, when only two candidates with an Iranian background entered the parliament. Moreover, the new coalition government in 2014 elected Ardalan Shekarabi as Minister for Public Administration. He was born in Iran and moved to Sweden with his mother at the age of 10 years as an asylum seeker. There are many more examples of young Iranians celebrated in various fields, such as literature, cinema or theatre. The following are a few well-known names who are active at the national level: Marjaneh Bakhtiari, Athena Farokhzad and Pooneh Rohi (literature); Farnaz Arbabi and Nasim Aghili (theater director); Shima Niavarani (actor), Ahang Bashi and Babak Najafi (film director); Laleh and Arash (music).

The high visibility of achievements of Iranians in Swedish society has generated an impression that Iranians are a successful group in Sweden. Timbro, a Swedish libertarian think tank, published *Från fattigdom till framgång* (From Poverty to Success) by Nima Sanandaji in 2012. The book tells the story of Iranians' 'exemplary' integration. The author neglects to mention the role of various forms of capital (cultural, economic and human) that Iranians have brought from their homeland. Although marginalised in the Swedish society, many Iranians belonged to the Iranian urban middle class and had had access to resources from Iran or other countries, which later on facilitated their entrepreneurial and academic achievements in Sweden. The diaspora media, from Los Angeles to Kuala Lumpur, regularly broadcast success stories and interviews with successful

Iranians outside Iran. In Sweden, the local radio programmes and online magazines, such as *Stockholmian*, reproduced the image of the successful Iranian group by regularly publishing names and images of 'rich', 'prominent', 'popular' Iranians in Sweden.

The rosy picture painted of 'super successful' Iranians obscures other segments of the group, namely failed asylum seekers; deportees; the undocumented, who are stuck in the informal labour market; and also those Iranians who suffer from protracted unemployment and underemployment. These precarious groups are often excluded in the main diasporic narratives and practices, not only by diaspora scholars but also by diasporic media. Those who are regarded as 'failed migrants' have often been invisibilised in studies of the Iranian diaspora. Perhaps this is the case of most diaspora studies. In diaspora studies, which are focussed on the concerns of middle class, the 'failed migrants' are generally marginalised and invisibilised, and when they are included, the term diaspora has an added adjective, such as 'abject diaspora' (Nyers 2010).

There is a neoliberal approach in many diaspora studies, which individualises and personalises the difficulties that the precarious groups in diasporas struggle with, as well as aims to foster responsible, prudent and entrepreneurial subjects. The notion of diaspora generally indicates achievement: construction of a home outside the homeland, entrepreneurship, establishment of organisations, media, transnational mobility and social connections. Ironically, undocumented Iranian migrants – who, as a cheap and docile labour force, constitute a vital factor in the successes of Iranian businesses – are not represented in the narratives of diasporic successes. The social exclusion makes the diaspora divided and split along both socioeconomic lines and legality lines (documented and undocumented).

Contested Narratives of Diaspora

The image of Iranians as thriving, entrepreneurial, prolific, responsible, self-regulating, prudent and adaptable in the host society, but at the same time loyal and devoted to Iran and their Iranian identity, is produced mainly by 'diaspora brokers'. By diaspora brokers, I mean all those actors who are engaged in the following: definition and maintenance of the boundaries of the diasporic group; connecting Iranian communities across borders; and developing networks that facilitate mobility and the flow of ideas, images, capital, goods and people. Iranian cultural associations, organisations, media and businesses usually function as brokers as well. Diaspora brokers who consistently adopt a diasporic stance belong to a 'small minority of the population that political or cultural entrepreneurs formulate as a diaspora' (Brubaker 2005: 12). As a series of practices, diaspora is used by brokers to make claims, mobilise people as well as articulate projects and expectations. Diaspora is used by brokers to formulate identities and claim loyalties. Therefore, diaspora becomes a heated field of contestation over authenticity, ideologies and economic resources. The conflict between diaspora brokers about how *Chahrshanbeh Souri* should be celebrated in Stockholm is an illustrative example.

Chahrshanbeh Souri or *Eldfesten*

Since the late 1980s, *Chahrshanbeh Souri* (the ancient celebration of the last Wednesday of the Iranian year) has been celebrated in Stockholm. Every year in mid-March, thousands of Iranians gather

to make a diasporic claim on Iranian identity and culture. Until the late 2000s, Iranians celebrated *Chahrshanbeh Souri* in a gravel football pitch in a northern suburb of Stockholm. The event was organised by *Iranska Riksförbundet* (National Federation of Iranians) in collaboration with local radio stations and Iranian entrepreneurs. It was a modest *Chahrshanbeh Souri*, with a large fire in the corner of the pitch, a disc jockey (DJ) playing music and two or three tents selling Iranian food. It mainly attracted first-generation Iranian migrants, and the visitors were usually families who came with their small children to see and experience 'Iranian culture'. Business and marketing was a palpable aspect of the event. Iranian businesses distributed ads, and local radio programmes held competitions with prizes like tickets to the 'homeland' (Iran). Suburban diaspora brokers used *Chahrshanbeh Souri* as an annual occasion to promote ethnic businesses intertwined with a diasporic claim.

Towards the end of the 2000s, other diaspora brokers started to organise *Chahrshanbeh Souri* in a novel way. *Farhang*, a cultural association, in collaboration with an Iranian programme director at *Riksteatern* (the Swedish National Theatre) transformed the celebration of *Chahrshanbeh Souri* and gave it the Swedish name *Eldfesten* (the festival of fire). With generous governmental funding for promoting cultural diversity, *Eldfesten* became a great success. According to the organisers, tens of thousands visit the event, which featured popular artists flying in from main diaspora hubs such as Los Angeles, Toronto, London or Dubai. The event was hosted by Maz Jobrani (a Los Angeles-based Iranian comedian and actor) in 2013 and Sina Valiollah (a TV host in Dubai) in 2017, who spoke mostly in English and some Persian. In 2011, the host was Alexandra Pascalidou, a Greek–Swedish journalist and TV host. In 2017, the Swedish Civil Minister was invited and he gave a short speech in Swedish, focussing on integration policies. Presenting *Eldfesten* as 'a fiesta for the spring, the sun and the return of the light', the organisers emphasised the transnationality of *Eldfesten* by also including non-Iranian performers and by welcoming a wider audience. The website of *Eldfesten* stated the following:

Our goal is to move the celebrations out of the suburbs into the city's most prestigious public plaza and to establish it as a recurring festival in Sweden for everyone regardless of nationality, age, religion or ethnicity (*Eldfesten* 2014).

Since 2016, the event has been broadcast live by the Swedish main TV channel and by the Iranian London-based *Manoto* TV channel. The spatial aspect of *Eldfesten* has been metaphorically significant. By moving the event from suburbia (invisible to most Swedes) into Kungsträdgården, a park in central Stockholm, the event was transformed from an isolated migrant activity into a national one. *Chahrshanbeh Souri* in the suburb was entirely Iranian, performed entirely in Persian and for a crowd of Iranians. *Eldfesten*, performed in English, Persian and Swedish, attracts a multi-ethnic audience, not only those national groups who celebrate *Chahrshanbeh Souri*, such as Iranians, Afghans, Kurds and Tajiks, but also Swedes and other ethnic groups who enjoy the fiesta. While *Chahrshanbeh Souri* could be seen as a diasporic claim, *Eldfesten* is part of a Swedish multicultural policy.

The suburban diaspora brokers, i.e. *Iranska Riksförbundet* (The Iranian Federation in Sweden), the radio stations and entrepreneurs in the ethnic economy, continued to arrange their own separate *Chahrshanbeh Souri*, which has been shrinking in size and scope every year. The inconspicuous event in a football pitch far from the city centre lost its audience to the spectacular and professionally arranged

Eldfesten. The competition between diaspora brokers increased. The conflict became dramatic in the first year that *Chahrshaneh Souri* was planned to be celebrated in *Kungsträdgården*, and the police had to cancel it after a false bomb threat. The suburban diaspora brokers accused *Riksteatern* (the Swedish National Theatre) of 'cultural stealing' (*dozdiye farhangi*). Local radio programmes started their attacks. Hamed, a businessman and major actor in organising Persian events, as well as a central link between the Iranian popular culture produced in Los Angeles (known as *Irangleles*) and the Swedish scenes, sent several protest letters to *Riksteatern*, accusing them of cultural stealing. He posted interviews with scholars in Iranian history on his Facebook wall, who testified that *Eldfesten* was a 'falsified' version of an ancient Iranian tradition. Hamed as a suburban diaspora broker, became the guardian of what he regarded as authentic Iranian culture. In his view, renaming the ritual *Eldfesten* and inviting the participation of other ethnic groups not only damaged the *Chahrshaneh Souri* celebrations but also constituted an attack on Iranian culture. *Riksteatern's* answer was short: '*Eldfesten* is for everyone who wants to celebrate it'.

Undoubtedly, there has been financial interest behind the conflict: losing *Chahrshaneh Souri* to *Eldfesten* means losing a potential market. Diaspora brokers who are active in the ethnic economy also protect their market by maintaining diasporic boundaries. The success and survival of this market, which involves local radio programmes, cultural events, ethnic businesses and ethnic associations (whose money received from the state depends on its number of members), are dependent upon the diasporic continuum. To compensate for the loss of *Chahrshaneh Souri*, suburban diaspora brokers started a new festival. The *Tirgan* festival was arranged for the first time in the summer of 2012, in a park north of Stockholm. Hamed was one of the main figures in initiating the festival. He blamed *Eldfesten* for 'de-Iranianisation' of *Chahrshaneh Souri* and chose *Tirgan* to 'highlight Iranian history, culture and identity'. On its website, the festival is presented as a celebration of *Arash Kamangir*, a Persian legendary figure who, in Iranian mythology, heroically solidified the sovereignty and independence of Iran under occupation by its enemies (Tirgan 2017). The *Tirgan* festival in Stockholm was influenced by the well-known *Tirgan* festival in Toronto. In the process of planning the festival in the first year, the director of the *Tirgan* festival in Toronto was consulted to develop the festival in Stockholm. The *Tirgan* festival is an attempt to reclaim and reinforce the diaspora boundaries. Unlike *Eldfesten*, which blurs the diaspora boundaries, the *Tirgan* festival manifests long-distance nationalism, emphasising boundary maintenance through asserting Iranian-ness using local artists and by introducing 'successful Iranians' in Sweden. *Tirgan* maintains diaspora boundaries and its market. Not celebrated in Iran and unfamiliar to many Iranians, *Tirgan* is an 'invented tradition' (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1992) by diaspora brokers. By inventing traditions, diaspora brokers create historical, social and cultural traditions to maintain continuity and social unity. A young woman put it this way:

These people who arrange all these to keep Iranian culture alive are a handful of baghal [businessmen]. They have no idea about this culture. Until yesterday, we have not heard the name of *Tirgan*. Suddenly they are experts on *Tirgan*. What is it? Where is it coming from? How many Iranians inside Iran know about *Tirgan* after all? This is about business and nothing else.

An interesting shift in the diasporic stances and claims is that diaspora brokers have started looking westwards, towards Toronto,

London and Los Angeles, for inspirations – e.g. the *Tirgan* festival in Toronto – rather than towards the homeland. Los Angeles, or *Irangleles*, as it is popularly known, has become the beacon of home, the repository of an Iranian culture more authentic than Iran itself (see Graham & Khosravi 1997). Gradually, the culture and meanings produced in Sweden, like in many other places, have become divorced from the culture in Iran. For the brokers, *Irangleles* has been the source for diasporic practices in the past 4 decades. Los Angeles and – to a lesser extent but increasing in significance – Toronto have turned into major nodes within the transnational space of Iranians' diasporic practices. Los Angeles, with the largest concentration of capital, expertise, popular culture industry and media makers, is the main node in the interconnected system, which facilitates flows of information, capital, ideas, images and cultural products. In recent years, London also, with two relatively new but very popular TV channels, *BBC Persian* and *Manoto*, has become a new media and popular culture node within the Iranian diaspora. Artists are invited to Sweden from *Irangleles*, and diaspora media programmes from Los Angeles and London are re-broadcast by local media in Sweden. Diaspora brokers travel there frequently and come back with new ideas: they design their radio programmes, food stores, restaurants and events according to *Iranglelesi* models (see Graham & Khosravi 1997, 2002). Thus, a great deal of the diaspora culture that is being constructed in Sweden is not taken directly from Iran or even from recollections of how things were in Iran. Instead, different national versions of the diaspora culture borrow from each other (Graham & Khosravi 1997). It seems that, like many other diaspora cases, the ties between cultural identity among Iranians and the homeland weaken gradually and a process of de-territorialisation among Iranians in diaspora takes form, i.e. their sense of Iranian-ness is no longer linked only to Iran but rather, or also, to other countries as well. When diasporic practices and stances are nourished more from Los Angeles or Toronto rather than from Tehran, and when they become less connected to the cultural agenda in the homeland, how diasporic then is the Iranian diaspora? In other words, how Iranian is the Iranian diaspora?

Segmented Diaspora

In November 2003, I interviewed Aida, a young Iranian-Armenian young woman. She was born and grew up in Sweden. Towards the end of the interview, she asked if she could discuss a 'personal issue' with me. She said that her father was pushing her to get married and that he insisted that her future husband must be an Armenian. Aida said that it was hard to find a man according to her father's wishes. I asked her why she did not try in Iran. She answered that Armenians inside Iran were more traditional and it would cause a lot of 'cultural clashes' between them. When I mentioned trying in Armenia, she said swiftly that she wanted an Iranian-Armenian so that they would have the same background and would 'understand' each other. I said that there was a huge Iranian-Armenian community in Los Angeles where she might find someone. Aida, nodding her head, said that she had been there and found Iranian-Armenians in Los Angeles more American than Iranian. In practice, there was only one option left to her: an Iranian-Armenian man born or having grown up in Sweden. Aida's concern about her future husband reveals the diversity and segmentation of what is imagined as a homogeneous diaspora. Members of the same ethnic group are shaped by the host culture and society more than the term 'diaspora' assumes. In reference to Aida, one question that comes to mind is what constitutes the

'Armenianness' in the Armenian diaspora. Similarly, Iranians' diasporic stances and practices are not the same everywhere. Perhaps, experiences of onward migrants reveal this variety. Babak migrated to Sweden in the mid-1980s when he was 20 years old. After 15 years, he migrated again from Sweden to the USA. I met him for an interview in San Francisco several years after his re-migration. Babak had a lot to say about the difference he experienced between Iranians in the USA and Iranians in Sweden:

I know many Iranian Americans but there is a difference between us Iranians from Sweden and Iranians in the USA. Sometimes, we do not understand each other, for instance when we talk about Iran. It seems as if we talk about different countries... We are a group of Iranians who moved here from Sweden who hang together. Iranian Americans enjoy things that we don't. I can say that they are more traditional Iranians than us. They follow Iranian traditions much more than we do in Sweden.

Babak's generalisation about Iranian Americans is shared by many other Iranians in Sweden. The stereotype of Iranian Americans used by my interlocutors in Sweden depicts Iranian Americans as materialistic, superficial, politically and culturally conservative as well as more religious.

Iranianness is a contested notion, and Iranian groups in different countries develop their own way of being Iranian. Iranianness is localised and, therefore, the experience of claiming and performing Iranianness differs in different societies. Being an Iranian in Sweden does not mean the same thing in the USA. Iranianness is experienced and negotiated differently in different societies. How Iranianness is experienced depends on the responses of the host society to the Iranian group. Responses differ due to a range of reasons, e.g. historical relations between Iran and the host country, the degree of shared social and cultural interests, the size of the Iranian migrant group and the status of Iranians in the host country.

Aida's and Babak's experiences illustrate the fragmentation and diversity of what is assumed to be homogeneous Iranianness. The Iranian 'diaspora' is segmented not only because it includes various ethnicities (Persian, Kurd, Baloch, Azari and so on), religions (Baha'i, Armenian, Judaism and Islam), ideologies (royalists, leftists, secular and religious), classes or other minorities (such as the growing queer sub-diaspora who have their own networks, media, organisations, practices and stances). It is segmented also because of the degree and scale of Iranians' embeddedness into local societies and local cultural identification.

New Diversities

A diaspora is also fragmented because there are different flows of migration. In late fall of 2010, I interviewed 11 young men and women who had come to Sweden as students between 2007 and 2009 and belonged to the most recent flow of migration from Iran to Sweden. An interesting finding that emerged from the interviews was their experiences of distance from the earlier-arrived Iranians. The young students categorised them as 'refugees' and themselves as 'migrants'. They used the term *panahandeh* (refugee) as a pejorative term. The stereotype of 'the refugee' and what she or he looks like is formed by media representations, as there is a tendency to represent the refugee as a special 'kind' of person (Malkki 1995). Refugees are portrayed as the embodiment of eternal human suffering and misery. To the young students with passports and visas in their

hands, financially supported by their middle-class parents, being a *panahandeh* means nothing more than failure. They see seeking asylum as something shameful and unethical (associated with illegalities, various forms of camps and sometimes deportation). In the interviews, the former generation of Iranian migrants (identified as refugees by recently arrived students) are not only seen as failing in their migratory projects, but they are also represented as 'uncultured', 'coming from lower levels of the Iranian society' or 'unreliable'. This belief was best captured in a comment made by a 32-year-old Iranian PhD candidate who had been living in Sweden since 2008. He said, 'They are refugees. They have low status and low culture. They live like parasites here and have spoiled the image of Iran.'

The same belief was echoed by a 29-year-old Iranian man who had also been in Sweden since 2008:

I don't trust them. Most of them are refugees. Our generation grew up in a different Iran, in a better educational, social and cultural milieu.

Another interesting aspect of the experienced generational gap is the contested claim to Iranianness. It is perhaps not unexpected, since the refugees and the students left Iran in different social and political atmospheres: the former during the 1980s and the latter during the 2000s. As indicated by the following comments, the students attributed the gap to 'cultural differences':

They came here as refugees. Newcomers are educated and have a higher level of culture and knowledge. Iranians who came before us have made problems and have had a bad impact on the Swedes' opinion about Iranians. (Woman, 25 years old; year of migration: 2009)

I don't like them. For me, they seem like dinosaurs. There is no cultural linkage between us and them....They are from a lower level of the Iranian society. (Woman, 32 years old; year of migration: 2007)

In contrast to the usual case, such as in McAuliffe's study (2008) or in Moghaddari's study (2016), in which the newer arrivals are looked down upon (labelled 'fresh off the boat') by the earlier arrivals, the student-migrants to Sweden posit Iranians who had come much earlier as the problem. The newer arrivals, consisting of students and professionals with strong socioeconomic resources and solid cultural capital (language proficiency and higher education), disassociate themselves from the 'refugees', who are regarded as being stuck in an 'exilic' and marginalised life. The former group, having grown up with new communication technologies and having good familiarity with globally dominant cultural codes, identify themselves as 'open to other cultures', 'cosmopolitan' and, at the same time, distance themselves from the mainstream diasporic narratives made by the 'refugee' groups. Such boundary-making between 'respectable' migrants and 'fraudulent' refugees has also been observed among Iranians in Germany (Moghaddari 2016). In her study of the Iranian community in Hamburg, Moghaddari shows that early-migrant merchants who migrated to Germany before the 1979 Revolution differentiate themselves from post-1979 refugees. It is not only an ideological but also a class boundary in the making.

Along with the recent student and professional migrants, an increasing number of queer (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender [LGBT]) migrants have transformed the Iranian diasporic narratives and practices. Although there has been queer activism among Iranians

in Sweden since the late 1990s, the newly arrived queer migrants have created more social visibility through political mobilisation and cultural activities. Visibility and the active participation of Iranian queer migrants in social movements, such as *Iranian Railroad for Queer Refugees* and *Iranian Lesbian and Transgender Network*, annual Pride Parades through Swedish cities and public debates, have contributed to redrawing the diaspora boundaries and the politics of belonging. One of the consequences of this for the Iranian diaspora is raising awareness about widespread homophobia among Iranians and the heteronormativity of diasporic narratives. Queer migration reveals not only how boundaries are racialised but also how they are gendered and sexualised. In their study of queer Iranian Americans, Abdi and Van Gilder (2016) show that the dominant discourse of the Iranian community in the USA works to exclude LGBTQ Iranians and to silence the voices of queer Iranian American women. Consequently, queer Iranian Americans create cultural distance from the main body of the Iranian community. Similarly, in order to cope with prejudices and discriminations, queer Iranians in Sweden maintain distance and suppress cultural identification with the Iranian community.

Whose National Imagination?

A recurrent comment by the student-migrants concerned the 'ignorance' of the refugees about what they called the 'real' Iran. How Iran is imagined differs among refugees who left Iran in the 1980s and the student-migrants who left Iran in the 2000s. The latter believe that the former group's reference to Iran is old and belongs to the early 1980s and that their claim to the homeland is a version and a memory of a place and period that is no more. A young student who left Iran in 2009 puts it this way:

They are something between Iranian and Swede. They are like Persian-speaking Swedes... They are frozen in time. Their culture is from 30 years ago.

or

When Iranians [in Sweden] talk about Iran, they depict an Iran which was during the war, a country in ruins and starvation. (Woman, 30 years old; year of migration: 2009)

The contestation between refugees and student-migrants is a contestation about the right to define the homeland and shape an identity in the diaspora. The different claims of possessing the rights to represent the 'authentic' Iranian culture cause a significant disruption in the mainstream Iranian diaspora in Sweden. Thus, diasporic practices for boundary maintenance are not only towards other groups but also within each group. The form of fetishisation of the homeland varies in different parts of the Iranian diaspora. In Los Angeles, where a monarchist discourse dominates the community, Iran becomes frozen in the 'golden age' of pre-revolutionary Iran, whereas in Sweden, where diasporic stances are made mainly by leftist groups, the homeland is frozen in the period of the vivacious political life during the Revolution and the decade afterwards. The meaning that is produced in Sweden establishes a differentiation both from the homeland under the Islamic Republic and from the royalist narratives from Los Angeles or London.

I started this article with a contested funeral, so I will finish it with a contested *Norouz*, the Iranian New Year ceremony. For several years, I have been following the *Norouz* ceremony simultaneously through three TV channels: the Stockholm-based *Miniatur TV*, the state-run *Jamejam* channel from Tehran and the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) Persian broadcast from London. These three channels narrate different aspects of Iranian identity: Islamic, Iranian and hybrid. *Jamejam* TV broadcasts an Islamised version of *Norouz* by emphasising Islamic influences, including the recitation of Quran verses and messages from religious leaders. The narrative of *Miniatur TV* is characterised by ethnic nationalism, emphasising the Persianness of the ritual, as well as signs and symbols of ancient Persian culture. The *BBC Persian* TV broadcasts a different narrative from the other two. Produced and performed by young journalists and programme producers who left Iran after the 2009 election protests, BBC Persian attracts a younger audience. Its narrative of *Norouz*, unlike the religious (*Jamejam*) and ethnic nationalist (*Miniatur*) ones, can be classified as a hybrid narrative of the ritual, because the BBC Persian service's narrative is based on a secular transnationalism rather than being limited to conventions such as nation or religion. It is pluralistic and includes other narratives and nations that celebrate *Norouz* such as Afghans, Tajiks and Kurds.

Different interpretations and performances of the same ritual display the diversity of national imagination among Iranians. There is not just one single imagined community but several imagined communities simultaneously at work in the lives of Iranians. Iranians have created several alternative national imaginations, a kind of simulacrum, to simulate, to feign and to have what one does not have (Baudrillard 1996: 167). While narratives from *Jamejam* and *Miniatur TV* aim to maintain boundaries, the BBC Persian service – like *Eldfesten*, in opposition to *Chahrshanbeh Souri* – goes beyond the national boundaries and presents hybridity and transnationalism. Are these practices making Iranian experiences out of Iran more transnational and less diasporic?

Conclusion

In his classic essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1990), Stuart Hall argues that diasporas are always framed by two simultaneously operative axes, one being the axis of similarity and continuity, and the other of difference and rupture. While the former provides grounding and continuity, the latter refers to change and discontinuity of identity in the diaspora (Hall 1990: 227). Following Hall, in this article, I have attempted to show the dialectic of how diasporic stances emphasise the national (diaspora) and simultaneously strive to become *transnational*. This is a dialectic of boundary maintenance and boundary erosion inherent in every diaspora. As Mavroudi (2007) correctly argues, diasporas are processual, constantly in an oscillating position between a bounded homeland-oriented identity and unbounded transnational identities.

The conflict between the national *Chahrshanbeh Souri* and transnational *Eldfesten*; the contestation between how *Norouz* is celebrated (Islamic, nationalistic or hybrid); the negotiation between different migrant generations about how to define and represent Iran and Iranianness; the tension between Muslim and Islamophobic Iranians, all are examples of this dialectic. As Brubaker (2005) put it, diaspora is a 'category of practices', always making and unmaking boundaries both inside and outside diaspora communities. The diaspora, as a wholly bounded entity, is an imagined construction made mainly by economic, ideological and cultural entrepreneurs or,

as I call them, diaspora brokers. Furthermore, we should remember that a large part of the Iranian group in Sweden does not take part in diasporic practices, and they do not imagine themselves to be diasporic. The Iranian diaspora in Sweden, perhaps similar to other diasporas, is not encapsulated in a defined homogeneous unit: rather, it is contested and fragmented along class, ideological, ethnic, generational and local cultural lines. The diversities of the claims, practices and stances shape multiple narratives of the Iranian diaspora. Closer ethnographic investigations, or as Abu-Lughod (1991) terms it, 'ethnographies of the particular', reveal such complexities (Werbner 2004), tensions, paradoxes and conflicts, as well as offering an alternative to 'the groupist portrayal of diasporas as tangible, quantifiable and bounded entities' (Brubaker 2005:11).

The changing political climate in Sweden (and in the rest of Europe) towards increasingly anti-migrant, in general, and anti-Muslim sentiments, in particular, will affect how Iranians define

themselves and their relation to the host society. Furthermore, social and political transformations in Iran will shape and reshape the future of Iranian diasporic narratives as well, and all these will keep perpetuating the Iranian diaspora's vacillating position between continuity and rupture.

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