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Millions of Iranians left their country after the coming to power of the Islamic Republic in February 1979. Some twenty years later, the urge to leave the country is as strong as it was in the early post-revolutionary years. In a world that is less hospitable to refugees, some Iranians risk their lives in search of a hostland. For many emigrating Iranians, the hostland does not readily turn into a new homeland. In fact, Iran is often present, or rather reproduced, in the memory, language, way of life, and the network of relationships that remain in place despite physical distance.

# Homeland and Hostland Iranian Press in Canada

More than ever, new communication technologies contribute to the collapse of time and space. Round-the-clock television and radio programming in Persian is available to diasporic communities around the world via satellite and the internet. Print journalism is also extensive in major urban centres.

*Be hich yār mad-e khāter o be hich diyār  
Ke barr-o bahr farākh ast oādami besyār  
Do not dedicate yourself to any companion  
and any land,  
Because lands and seas are vast and human  
beings numerous.*

(Sa'di of Shiraz, Persian poet, 1184-1292 AD)

Quoted out of context, Sa'di's couplet seems to be a call for detaching oneself from community and place of birth. Later in the poem, however, he celebrates the ties that bind people together and asks: 'Who will shy away from the affection of a friend. Which lover will turn away from the intimacy of a beloved?'<sup>1</sup> Sa'di was probably not contradicting himself if we see detachment and attachment not in isolation but as constituents of a dialectical relationship.

### The Iranian diaspora of Canada

The number of Iranian immigrants in Canada was approximately 100 in 1961 and increased to 660 by 1970.<sup>2</sup> According to the 1996 census figures, Persian, the official or state language of Iran, was the 'mother tongue' of 60,275 Canadians (out of a population of 28,846,261).<sup>3</sup> It ranked 17<sup>th</sup> among some 110 non-official languages of the country (English and French being the only official languages).

Canada is a country of the ideal 'civic nation' system in which citizenship is not based on relations of blood, ethnicity, language, religion, or national origin. The overwhelming majority of Iranian-born Canadians acquired Canadian citizenship without rejecting their previous citizenship. Iranian presence can already be felt in the major urban centres. There are Iranian grocery stores, mosques, restaurants, travel agencies, driving schools, bookstores, and Persian language sections in public libraries. Persian signs can be seen in some business quarters.

### Where is the homeland?

The following newspapers, mostly weeklies, were published in Toronto in 2000: *Irān Estār* (Iran Star), *Irān-e Javān* (Young Iran), *Iran Tribune*, *Irān Post*, *Javānān* (Youth), *Salām Toronto* (Hello Toronto), *Sarmāye* (Capital), *Sepidār* (White Poplar), and *Shahrvand* (Citizen). All are secular, privately owned, financed primarily through advertising income, and distributed free of charge in places frequented by the targeted readership (grocery stores, restaurants, video and bookstores).

Browsing through these papers, one notes immediately that the coverage of Canadian news is minimal. Although interest in the country of origin is to be expected in the 'ethnic media' of all immigrant communities, most of the cited papers are sharply focused on Iran. The limited space devoted to the Canadian-Iranian community is also centred on issues and activities related to Iran and being Iranian.

The over-representation of Iran in the press is matched by similar preoccupations in face-to-face communication. Many Iranian Canadians refer to the majority (i.e. the white population of European origin) as *khāreji* (i.e. foreigner). The word means 'external, outer, exterior, foreigner, outsider, stranger, alien'<sup>4</sup> and has been used in Iran to refer to non-citizens, especially European travellers or residents. The label is not intended to treat Euro-Canadians as 'foreigners'; its use indicates deep-rooted ties – linguistic and political – to the country of origin, Iran.

In a similar vein, the words *hamvatan* and *hammihan*, both meaning 'compatriots', are used to refer to Iranian Canadians only. The synonyms *vatan* and *mihan* mean 'homeland, country, motherland, fatherland'. The word *ham* means 'also, too, likewise, even, both, homo-, co-, con-, com-, sym-, iso-, equi-, syn-', and as a prefix it means 'fellow' as in *hamkelās* (classmate), or *hamkār* (fellow worker).<sup>5</sup>

The treatment of Iranian Canadians of Christian faith shows a similar trend of attachment to Iran. Like the papers published in Iran, the Persian language press of Canada writes: 'We congratulate the new Christian [sāl-e milādi] year to our Christian compatriots' (front page headline in red, *Mehr-e Irān*, Toronto, Vol. 1, No. 3, January 1991).<sup>6</sup> In Canada, however, the addressees of this

message continue to be Christian Iranians rather than the entire Christian population of Canada. The editorial of the quoted paper ends by writing: 'In a couple of months, the new Iranian year [*Nowruz*, March 21], too, will arrive. And why should not we turn every day into a day of housecleaning of our spirit?' – housecleaning being a practice of preparing for the new year.

Equally noteworthy is the treatment of the indigenous population of Canada. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Iranian perceptions of Canada and the United States have been shaped by colonialist politics and discourses. Thus many Iranian Canadians continue to label aboriginal peoples collectively as *sorkhpust* (i.e. redskin) and refer to the Inuit people of the Arctic region as *eskimo*; these derogatory labels are not used in Canada today.

Even in the civic nation of Canada, extralegal dynamics of inequality – racial, cultural, economic, social, and political – reinforce the attachment of new citizens to their ethnic, religious, racial, and national roots.<sup>7</sup> Some Iranian Canadians use the word *gharib-e* (stranger) to describe themselves. The author of a series of articles dealing with the census data about Iranian Canadians chose the title 'Stranger in the land of strangers'.<sup>8</sup> In spite of these linguistic and discursive reproductions of the country of origin, characteristic of the first generation, many Iranians integrate into their new homeland.

### Struggle for control of the diaspora

If Iranian Canadians continue to be attached to their first homeland, the Islamic state too continues to regard them as Iranian citizens. Initially Tehran's policy was the rejection of emigrants as 'counter-revolutionaries' who had betrayed both Islam and Iran. A more tolerant approach was adopted in the early 1990s in order to encourage their return to Iran and to stem the exodus. Although this policy failed, it has allowed many refugees to travel to Iran and return again to their diasporas. It also contributed to Western governments' adoption of policies to restrict the admission of Iranian refugees.

While Iranian exiles have established stable diasporas in the West, the instability of the Islamic state together with its policies of re-



pression continue to create new waves of emigrants, including highly skilled groups, professionals, investors and the youth.

Twenty years after the revolution, diasporas have gained in importance and they impact in diverse ways the political environment in Iran. Some members of the exilic community engage in political activism aimed variously at the reform or overthrow of the Islamic regime. Moreover, members of the diaspora influence the foreign policy of the countries where they have become new citizens. Not surprisingly, a struggle has ensued over the control of the diaspora.

Iran's policy of controlling the diaspora is complex, diverse, and implemented through the chain of embassies, consulates and all the power that diplomacy and statehood bring into play. Moreover, Tehran uses satellite broadcasting; allows artists, film makers, films, singers, and sport teams to travel abroad; builds mosques and religious centres; offers material rewards for those using these services; and gathers information on exilic communities.

The opposition in exile was quick to note the shift in policy. Debates have been going on about the extension of state repression to the diaspora and how to confront it. According to one political trend, the Islamic regime should not be allowed any space in the diaspora. This involves a boycott of its export products, sports and art groups, and other in-

tellectual inroads into the exilic community. It also dismisses return to the homeland, or engaging in intellectual and publishing activities there.<sup>9</sup> However, a large number of Iranians who do not support the Islamic state demonstrated strong attachment to their first homeland when a soccer team visited Australia, Canada and the U.S. in the late 1990s. The visit of the pop singer Googoosh to Canada and the U.S. in 2000 also rallied tens of thousands of nostalgic audiences to her performances. She had been denied the freedom to perform in Iran since 1979.

The de-territorialization of a sizeable population of Iranian dissidents has a far-reaching impact on the political destinies of Iran. Today, the struggle between the diaspora and the Islamic state goes on everywhere – at conferences and demonstrations, in print and broadcast media, and on the internet. However, convergence of political interest between the two sides has developed in the wake of the rise of 'the reformist movement' in and outside the government. Browsing through the diaspora press, it is often difficult to distinguish between the reformist trend in Iran and in exile.

*This article is based on research in progress and a paper presented at the 34<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the Middle Eastern Studies Association of North America, November 2000.*

#### Notes

1. These are quotations from the first part of a well-known panegyric *qaisda* by Sa'di.
2. Cited in Navid Azadi, 'Gharib-e dar sarzamin-e gharib-e-hā' (Strangers in the land of strangers), *Shahrvand*, Vol. 9, No. 452, 28 January 2000, p. 20.
3. *Canadian Almanac and Directory 2000*, Toronto: Micromedia, 1999, p. 1-48.
4. Aryanpur-Kashani, A. and M. (1983), *The Concise Persian-English Dictionary*, Tehran: Amir Kabir Publications.
5. Ibid.
6. The exact words, *sāl-e now-e milādi rā be'omum-e hamvatanān-e masih-i tabrik migu'im*, can be found in other papers (e.g. *Sāyebān*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January 1998, p. 2).
7. See, for instance, Himani Banerjee (2000), *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender*, Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.
8. Navid Azadi, *ibid.* footnote 3 above.
9. For a survey of the politics of return see, for instance, Azadeh Seppehr, 'Honar-e bāzgasht va bāzgasht-e honari' (The art of return and the artistic return), published first in *Qāsedak* (Europe), reprinted in *Kārikātor*, Toronto, Vol. 1, No. 4, 1997.

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