

Chapter 15

The Choice for the “Zendegie Normal (Normal Life)”: Changes Among Iranian Young Immigrants



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Abstract Up to a few years ago, reasons of Iranians’ migration and immigration were personal development, free life, better educational environment, and social welfare among others. However, the situation appears dire as it is circulated on social media that today’s Iranian youth migrate overseas for “air to breathe, basic living, and COVID-19 vaccination for survival”—it is their choice for a “normal life”. Iranian dream of breaking away from the day-to-day politics of surveillance and escaping to foreign countries are like virtual worlds in their reality. This chapter seeks to examine the Iranian’s forms of migration and the social context.

Keywords Iran · Brain drain · Migration · Iranian young generation

15.1 Introduction

Up to a few years ago, the reason of young Iranians’ migration and immigration was for the pursuit of personal development, free life, better educational environment, and social welfare among others. However, the situation appears dire as it is circulated on social media that today’s Iranian youth migrate overseas for “air to breathe, basic living, and COVID-19 vaccination for survival”—it is their choice for a *normal life*. “Whoever can leave, goes” is also an expression that clearly shows the consensus for overseas migration in Iranian society as a self-deprecating yet longing voice for leaving their homeland.

This paper analyzes the historical and social background of overseas migration in contemporary Iran, and especially examines the phenomenon of upper middle-class elite group’s migration among the many branches of overseas migration in the country. Research on international migration in Iran is mostly conducted regarding the large-scale colonies of migrants or the process of settlement in the countries of destination, focusing on the matter of identity and adaptation in cases of successful Iranian diaspora.

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However, this study collects the voices of those still in Iran yet wishing to migrate or immigrate, instead of discussing the cases after immigration, and thus analyzes the structural background of society that urges people to choose migration or immigration. This study especially examines the brain drain issue to investigate the complex social structure as the background of migration. As the brain drain issue can be a key into not only the migration problem but also the realistic problems faced by the Iranian young generation, this study centralizes educational migration, one of the various types of overseas migration.

This study analyzes the educational actualities of Iran and the brain drain phenomenon through literature review, statistical examination, and anthropological in-depth interviews. Since this study set out to deal mostly with the international migration of people in or above the upper middle class, field research for this study was mainly conducted in northern and northwestern Tehran, where the upper middle class mostly reside. This area is one where many residents are parents whose children are dual citizens or students studying abroad. There is even a saying, “At least one child in every household in the Northern Tehran is away in another country,” which refers to the urban spatial characteristic of the area as being directly influenced by the diaspora culture. Also, many upper-class residents here are dual citizens themselves, and the efforts made to acquire permanent residency in foreign countries through relatives or children are not considered special here. The northern Tehran is full of expensive condominiums and houses of privileged upper-class residents, along with embassies, office buildings of foreign enterprises, international schools, and expat housing.

As Fig. 15.1 shows, the northern and northwestern areas of Tehran are the most economically rich regions, with different meanings in terms of class and culture from other areas of the city. Average household spending in northern Tehran is triple the amount in the southern part of the city, and the average size of living space is also over four times the average in southern Tehran. The northern and northwestern parts of Tehran also host famous commercial districts, shopping centers, and shops of foreign brands, and allow a direct observation of a global youth culture, hybrid popular culture, and the consumption culture of urban upper class (Koo, 2017, pp. 13–22).

Filling up the landscape of northern Tehran are large-scale electronics shopping complex, sleek cafes with fancy vibes, famous Italian bistros, Thai and other Asian restaurants, and flagship stores of foreign brands not easily found in Iran. Residents of northern and northwestern Tehran have different cultural tastes from those of residents in other areas. They especially show differences in economic level, class, and cultural standards beyond mere geographical difference from residents of southern area, thus portraying varying cultural topographies and cultural tastes. The northern and southern areas also show difference in class following their occupations and economic power; while citizens who are professionals or office workers such as managers mostly reside in the northern area, many citizens in the working class live in the southern area. The two areas show not only simple economic differences but also striking differences in political tendencies. Citizens in northern Tehran have reformist political tendency and are rather secularized in terms of religion, but the

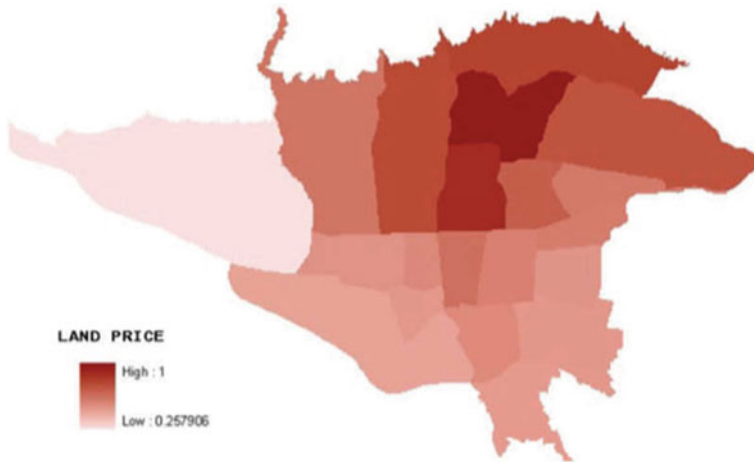


Fig. 15.1 Land price of Tehran (Chamanara & Kazemeini, 2016)

lower middle-class residents of the southern area are religiously more conservative and are considered to have a pro-government political tendency (Koo, 2017, pp. 3–21). Moreover, northern and northwestern areas of Tehran are crowded with international schools, overseas educational agencies, language schools, and immigration offices, so that they serve as the most suitable site for field investigation for collecting information on the immigration fervor in Iran and educational migration.

This study is based on a year-long field research in Tehran, Iran, in 2009 and a short-term field investigation of three years from 2015 to 2017. I conducted online interviews with eight subjects who were residing in Iran at the time of 2009 field research but later migrated to the U.S. and the U.K. I also interviewed ten Iranian students studying in Iran in 2020 and 2021.

As can be seen in the large-scale anti-government protest over December 2017 and January 2018, Iranian society still faces social problems of various textures due to economic and cultural factors. The chronic economic aggravation and high unemployment rate of Iran are especially the most urgent or hardest knot to untie, regardless of the government’s character. Through this study, I will trace the large frame of overseas migration in Iran in the wider scope and, in the narrower and deeper scope, examine the social and cultural background of the brain drain phenomenon. I will thus analyze one cross section of the Iranian migration issue, which ranges from short-term studying broad to long-term overseas residency.

15.2 The Historical Flow of Iranian Overseas Migration and Forms of Migration

The overseas migration of Iranians is seen in various forms depending on period and class. Large-scale overseas migration can be divided largely into three phases by socioeconomic and political conditions. The first wave occurred from 1950 to 1977, when upper middle-class families migrated to the U.S. or the U.K. to educate their children. It was especially with the people of the Pahlavi family in the center that international migration took place (Gholami, 2016). It is also notable that Iran's brain drains, which this study will mainly deal with, also has been occurring in diverse ways since the 1950s, and the issue of medical doctors migrating to the Western world, which is the most serious problem in current Iranian society, also started from this period. The situation of Middle Eastern countries' citizens' migration to the U.S. from 1953 to 1973 shows that the number of Iranian migrants increased from 160 in 1953 to 2,998 in 1973, and the number of students increased from 997 in 1960 to 4,832 in 1973. Furthermore, it is recorded that 2,229 doctors who graduated from Iranian medical schools were active in practice in the U.S. in 1973 (Askari & Cummings, 1977). In sum, international migration in this period was limited to the upper class, and it was around this time that highly educated Iranians started migrating overseas.

The second large-scale overseas migration occurred around the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. In 1979 when the Islamic Revolution took place, the migration started with 500,000 people and continued for several years after the revolution as nearly a million people left their home country. This *great escape* occurred mostly with political refugees, intellectuals, artists, skilled workers, professional workers (doctors, dentists, pharmacists, engineers, etc.), entrepreneurs, and ethnic minorities (Haberfeld & Lundh, 2014). One of the characteristics of Iranian migration in this period is that it was a large-scale migration of minorities who believe in religions other than Islam, such as the Baha'is, Jewish, Armenians, and Assyrians. Another characteristic was the migration of young male citizens who were evading being drafted into the military during the Iran-Iraq War (Hakimzadeh & Dixon, 2006; Naghdi, 2010). Although there is no accurate statistical figure for the number of Iranians who left their home country after the Islamic Revolution, it is estimated to be from 1.5 to several million (Mossayeb & Shirazi, 2006), and from 75,000 to about 150,000 Iranians come to migrate between 1979 and 1985 to the U.S. only (Hakimzadeh & Dixon, 2006; Mostofi, 2003).

Up to 1980, most Iranian migrants to the U.S. were on short term studying abroad for acquiring higher educational degrees, and later the number of migrants came to increase as their families joined them (Modarres, 1998). While 15–25% of Americans have bachelor's degrees, over half of the Iranians in the U.S. have degrees higher than bachelor's (Feliciano, 2005), which shows that Iranian migrants of this period were also mostly highly educated (Hakimzadeh & Dixon, 2006; Mossayeb & Shirazi, 2006; Naghdi, 2010). In Canada, too, Iranians displayed a differentiation from other groups of migrants, since highly educated people migrated there as much as the U.S. (Moghaddam et al., 1987). In case of the U.S., large-scale settlement before and

Table 15.1 The total number of migrants in the country and its growth rate in different periods

Period	Total immigrants	The proportion of immigrants to the population (annually)
1966–1976	5,224,790	17.8
1976–1986	5,820,625	14.0
1986–1996	8,718,770	16.0
1996–2006	12,148,148	18.6
2006–2011	5,534,666	15.2

Source Moshfegh (2013), Statistical Center of Iran, population and housing censuses of 1966–2011¹

after the Islamic Revolution took place in Los Angeles, which led to the creation of Iranian communities in the U.S. with nicknames like Tehrangeles or Irangeles. It was reported through survey that 41% of Iranian migrants in the U.S. were living in Los Angeles in 2000 (Hakimzadeh & Dixon, 2006).

The third wave of large-scale migration started in 1995 and is being continued in the present. A characteristic of this third phase is that low-educated migrant workers started their migration to Asian countries such as Japan and Singapore, different from the skilled workers or highly educated migrants who moved to the West in the past. The number of refugees also soared, as 92,367 Iranians submitted refugee application to the U.S., U.K., Canada, Germany, and the Netherlands from 1995 to 2004. In 2001, Iranian refugee applicants to the U.K. increased by about 300%, and in 2004, the rate skyrocketed so much that 10% of the total refugee applicants to the U.K. were taken up by Iranians. Gholami (2016) explains the background of such high refugee application rate among Iranians as the economic crisis, low employment opportunities, poor human rights situation, and political tensions in their homeland. However, as the refugee application process in Europe and other places became more complicated, quite a high number of Iranians came to stay as unregistered residents.

As shown in Tables 15.1 and 15.2, the rates and numbers of migrants are the highest around the Iran-Iraq War in late 1980s and early 1990s and decrease after the 2000s. This decrease is interpreted to be correlated with the ever-stricter conditions for migration in the American and European continents. It is also a major aspect of the background that migration conditions for Muslims from the Middle East have been made much stricter after the 9.11 attacks in the U.S. As overseas migration has become complicated and the economies of U.S. and Europe have aggravated, recent Iranian migrants tend to include only the students and their mothers, creating transnational families separated by children studying abroad (Fig. 15.2).

According to UN’s data, the U.S. is the primary destination for Iranian immigrants. Statistics of Iranian immigrants in America are presented upon two standards: foreign born and U.S. born. A statistical figure from 2017 shows that the population of Iranian-born immigrants living in the U.S. reached 385,000, while that of U.S.-born Iranians reached 477,000. Most (over 74%) of these Iranians have received higher education, with about 72% of them between 18 to 64 years old, meaning that they are

¹ <https://epc2016.princeton.edu/papers/160998>.

Table 15.2 Major destination countries of migration 1990–2019 and number of migrants (Unit: Persons)²

	Country	Population of Iranians in the world 1990–2019									
		1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2019			
	World	631,339	746,894	831,372	889,941	989,560	1,171,364	1,301,975			
1	USA	210,941	250,390	290,199	314,199	348,249	394,223	403,136			
2	Canada	29,467	51,266	74,284	95,395	120,685	153,473	164,463			
3	Germany	95,723	100,27	104,331	108,310	111,268	115,936	127,177			
4	Britain	31,563	36,022	41,087	58,694	61,831	79,072	89,794			
5	Turkey	23,816	13,188	13,427	14,397	14,728	39,332	83,183			
6	Sweden	40,154	47,650	13,427	54,470	62,120	69,067	79,308			
7	Australia	17,599	19,260	51,101	26,720	36,480	61,690	73,002			
8	Israel	47,785	51,220	21,360	50,950	50,732	52,322	50,881			
9	Netherlands	5,187	12,357	51,786	24,051	50,486	29,405	33,819			
10	France	23,359	24,114	19,921	20,643	25,486	23,705	25,091			
11	Norway	5,198	7,055	24,869	11,637	21,399	16,222	18,707			
12	Austria	8,535	9,629	8,857	11,986	13,086	15,495	18,291			
13	Denmark	8,022	9,753	10,723	12,029	12,352	14,689	17,716			
14	Italy	19,096	14,034	11,483	11,701	14,360	14,925	17,059			
15	Iraq	14,976	44,953	8,971	17,396	17,568	14,406	14,753			
16	Swiss	4,686	5,372	42,602	6,953	8,030	11,562	12,998			
17	Belgium	3,157	2,480	1,731	4,445	8,569	10,554	11,399			
18	Finland	558	1,1160	1,782	3,040	5,101	7,225	9,137			
19	Armenia	10,242	10,242	11,205	7,411	6,172	8,135	8,090			
20	Spain	2,159	2,159	3,477	4,212	4,920	5,888	6100			

² <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=MIG>

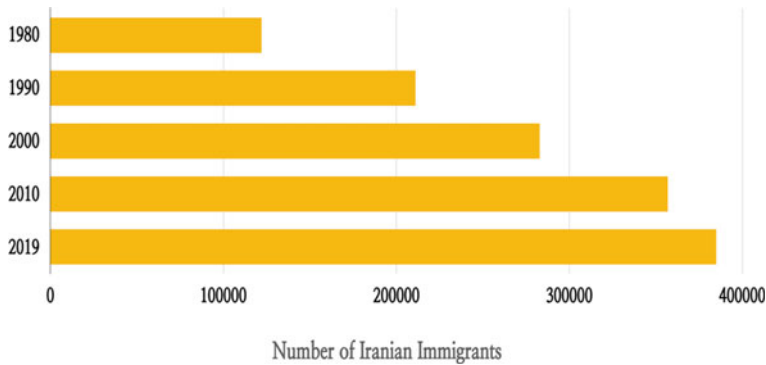


Fig. 15.2 Iranian immigrant population in the United States³

in the working age group. There is a rising percentage of people who have completed vocational college courses or received master’s degree or higher, and 29% of Iranians aged over 25 living in the U.S. have received graduate-level education.⁴

Though the number of Iranian naturalization cases decreased during Trump’s presidential office, statistics show that 8,000 to 10,000 Iranians became U.S. citizens annually from 2010 to 2018. During this period and especially after 2015, the number of Iranians who could be issued green cards or temporary work and study visas decreased.

Meanwhile, the destination countries preferred by those considering overseas migration or studying abroad are none other than the countries where their family or relatives are already residing. In case of the U.S., migration is impossible through invitation of relatives unless one is married to a permanent resident or citizen of the U.S., but European countries such as Germany or Italy have relatively simpler procedures for invitation, so that there are many migration cases that are achieved through being invited by relatives.

<Case 2>

In case of O, her aunt married an Italian man, acquired Italian nationality, which led to O’s mother and maternal grandmother getting residency in Italy. In 2009, her sister and her brother-in-law who is an attorney migrated to Italy as investment immigration with her uncle’s invitation. Her brother-in-law graduated from college in Bulgaria and his younger sister still lives there. O’s sister and nephew prepared for the migration to Italy while her brother-in-law kept his job in Iran even as he went back and forth between Iran and Italy. On the other hand, he even bought a house in France just in case it could help him receive right of residence there. O married a Korean man and lived in Korea for about two years but went to Italy after getting married to receive the right of residence in Italy along with her original family. It took her several years to go through the migration process, and as of 2018, she currently lives in Italy with her Korean husband. I asked O’s sister X, amidst her preparation for immigration, the reason for the relocation.

³ <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/iranian-immigrants-united-states-2021>.

⁴ <https://www.eghtesadonline.com> (<http://abit.ly/dlurvck>).

“I decided to move to Italy for my seven-year-old son. Of course, I know well enough that there is no place better than one’s motherland. But with the Iranian nationality, it is so hard to even go on a trip abroad. It’s the same in Korea, and Americans only see us as terrorists. It is so inconvenient and difficult to enter other countries, too. But if we were to become Italian nationals with Italian passports, it would be so much more comfortable to live. My son asks me every day when we are moving to Italy. My husband has a good occupation as an attorney, but no matter how good one’s job is, if this country’s economic and social realities are this bad, there is nothing to get better.” (O’s family)

The people I met in Iran who had citizenship or residency in the U.S., U.K., or Canada had an attitude of bystanders. Whenever there were disturbances in Iranian society or political and economic crisis occurred, their stance was that although the situation is regrettable, they can just go back to the U.S. or the U.K. if it aggravates. It is from the display of such an attitude that lower middle-class people of Iranian society expressed a sense of incongruity, betrayal, and complaint for the upper class with cultural and economic capital. The estrangement between classes in Iran can only be represented as political conflicts, and this in turn became the most supportive background for the conservatives and traditional powers at the time of Ahmadinejad’s administration.

Iran’s conservative power with the former Ahmadinejad administration and supreme leader Khamenei in the center argue for the imperativeness of their regime by putting forward the lower middle class, army, and the clergy. Yet the upper middle class and upper class complain of suffocation by the conservative restraint of the Islamic regime, deepening the rift between classes in the polarized society. Thus, Iranian people have ambivalent emotions toward those who have already immigrated or those who have dual nationalities, seeing them as both objects of envy and the privileged class who look away from the difficulties of their homeland. In the following section, I will analyze the social and cultural reasons of overseas migration in Iranian society to inquire into the more fundamental causes of Iranian migration.

15.3 Why Are They Leaving Iran?

In Tehran, the Iranian capital, English kindergartens were prevailing among the rich even before 2009. The kindergarten tuition amounted to \$500, which exceeded the average annual salary in 2009 of \$300–400 (6), and expensive German cars lined up in front of the kindergartens, dropping off and picking up kids. Parents of these kids were mostly business owners, famous soccer players, actors, and expats in Iran. Though the English kindergartens were upper-class-oriented, this can be seen as a case that displays a cross section of Iranian society’s fervor for overseas migration since most of the parents in the English kindergarten were either considering immigration or already had dual nationalities.

A similar situation is made much starker in Tehran’s international schools. There are coed international schools in Tehran’s *Sharak-e Gharb*, a town where Iran’s nouveau riche and upper middle-class professionals mostly reside in. The kids in

Sharak-e Gharb usually wear clothes from American and French brands that are hard to find in Iran. The international schools in Iran are for foreign expats in Iran, but along with the British School and the Italian School, 70–80% of the student body is taken up by Iranian students who have foreign nationalities. As of 2009, the international school considered the best in Iran was the British School, and most of the students there were Iranians, with only a handful of British students. The annual tuition amounted to \$30,000, but the application queue was always full of prospective students. The international schools in Iran were mostly filled with students who had either migrated back to Iran after spending their childhood in the U.S., Sweden, Australia, or the U.K., or lived in Iran after acquiring citizenship through the means of maternity trips. The British School was closed in 2012 due to political reasons, and currently the German Embassy School remains as the international school preferred by expats and the wealthy class in Iran.

However, general international schools in Iran are under the influence of the Islamic government. Among those schools, Tehran International & Adaptive School is a national school and thus is heavily regulated by the Iranian government. Although it is an international school, it consists of different campuses for boys and girls from the elementary level, just like the regular Iranian public schools.

An enormous portrait of Imam Khomeini is hung at the entrance of the school. All subjects are taught with English texts in English, but the curriculum includes religion classes so that students are given mandatory education on Islamic studies. Girls at this school are not much different from those in Iranian public schools, as they are expected to wear dark colored uniforms and dark blue *maghnaeh*.⁵ Students in lower grades which are equivalent to elementary school wear lighter blue uniforms with white *maghnaeh*. If anything were to be different from regular local schools in Iran, it is that students may take off the *maghnaeh* in classrooms. All teachers of the girls' campus are female, as all teachers of the boys' campus are male.

Most students who have graduated from English kindergartens and international schools hold dual nationalities as do their parents, and naturally follow the steps of entering universities abroad. International school graduates mostly go on to universities in the U.S., Canada, Australia, and Europe. According to interviews with Korean students attending international schools in Tehran, most Iranian students there are children of high clerics in Iranian society, entrepreneurs, famous sports players or celebrities, and had pride in their global backgrounds. While there is a strong desire for international education with overseas migration in consideration, college entrance within Iran is also rather heated at the same time. From these aspects, it appears that there are people in Iran who dream of a one-way escape while upper-class dual nationals with cultural and economic resources are characteristic of domiciliating strategically between their home countries and foreign countries of settlement.

As shown in the popular saying “*Har kyashi ke mitune bere, mire* (Whoever can leave, goes),” immigration is an object of envy for all Iranians. Then why do they strive to acquire the right of residence in other countries, and why are they obsessed with

⁵ A type of hijab worn in public, official space. It is usually part of the uniform for companies, government offices, and schools.

dual nationalities? Though the background of immigration in Iran must be diverse and overlapped for everyone, the following four sociocultural backgrounds other than personal reasons are analyzed to be the main causes: (1) a choice in preparation for social instability; (2) political reasons; (3) a choice for ideological and cultural freedom; and (4) economic reasons.

First, let us examine the cases of people who chose immigration due to social instability. Political asylum including large-scale immigration took place in Iran around the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and number of people opting for immigration skyrocketed due to their anxiety from eight years of the Iran-Iraq War. After the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, countless people were purged in prison for the reason of different ideologies, while many were demoted and people like female judges lost their jobs. The painfully continued Iran-Iraq War had the Iranians recognizing their homeland as a *dangerous and unstable place*, and the social instability that followed gave prominence to the alternative of overseas asylum.

The obtainment of dual nationalities or immigration is mostly put into practice among the upper or wealthy class as shown in the above cases, but the fad of immigration was considered a dream to seek even for people in middle and lower classes. Due to the drastic sociocultural changes after the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War that produced countless casualties, the Iranian people had directly experienced anxiety and instability. Young men especially opted for studying abroad or migrating alone during the war in order to evade being drafted into armed forces.

An entrepreneur born in 1976, A, of case 3, had married young and had a ten-year-old child at the time of our 2009 interview. His wife and son were living in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates close to Iran, and they were aiming for moving to Canada in the long range. He was part of the generation that had experienced the Iran-Iraq War, accounting the instability of Iranian politics and lack of freedom as his reason for migration.

<Case 3>

A: My generation experienced the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the war from 1980 to 1988. I still remember the sound of explosions that made us tremble in fear every night. My generation lived through extremely unstable times. My wife and ten-year-old son live in Dubai now, and my son attends an international school there. My family is very satisfied with this living arrangement. I can't just liquidate the business I'm doing in Iran, so I visit them two or three times a month.

Researcher: Why did you decide to let your son study in Dubai?

A: It is because I don't want my son to live in this chaotic world. What kind of world do we live in now? Is it not an era of English and computers? For my son to have a better future in this era, I sent my son and wife to Dubai two years ago. I want to prepare the best conditions for my son. For our long-term goal of migrating to Canada, I'm doing my best alone, although it is challenging. My son is ten years old now, and he is already disoriented when he visits Iran from time to time. He asked once, "Why is it bad to watch satellite TV?" so I told him, "It's illegal," and he was confused, saying "Why is it illegal? All my friends have satellite TV..." I don't want to let my son live in a society where you must lie and cannot show yourself. (A, aged 42, male, entrepreneur)

As shown in the above statements, Iran's middle-aged and elderly generations as well as those in their late thirties have vivid memories of the war with Iraq, and

always feel anxiety because they had experienced the chaotic society right after the revolution. The anxiety of dreading another national crisis functions as a major reason for migration. Obtaining American citizenship or green card became a fad among the wealthy people of Tehran, and most young people of rich or reformist families have already immigrated or are dual nationals. It is with this background that parents start preparing for immigration when their children are young, either for the future of their children or because it is much advantageous for them to study or work abroad later. The wealthy people carry out maternity trips for anchor babies.

<Case 4>

B's family applied for Green Cards in the U.S. five years before the Islamic Revolution (in 1974) and obtained them after ten years. B became a U.S. citizen twenty years after that. B has not lived in the U.S. continuously, having only lived there one year in her childhood and coming back and forth between Iran and the U.S., staying there only two months per year. Her sister and brother live in Los Angeles, and her parents and B herself mostly live in Iran. Her sister is a 42-year-old doctor, who is about to marry an American. B's sister has not returned to Iran for fifteen years. When she came back for the last time fifteen years ago, she went through a hassle at the airport. There was a CD of an American pianist in her bag, and it became the excuse of the authorities to go through her bags. She no longer wants to visit Iran since then. B's sister has almost become an American. On the contrary, B does not want to live in the U.S. There are some positive aspects of living in the U.S., but it is not as happy for her as the life in her home country. (B, female, aged 27, medical student)

I asked B, “Other Iranians are anxious to go to the U.S., but you are different. Is it because you could go whenever, if you wanted?” and she answered, “Perhaps so. Others can't even dream of it, but it's true that I can go there whenever I want.” Although B had said in 2009 that she was happier to live in Iran, she left for the U.S. in 2011 and currently works as a doctor there. Young urban Iranians and those with reformist and secular tendencies mostly find their reasons for migration in politics and ideological and cultural freedom. As free overseas trips are currently difficult with Iranian nationalities, the young generation endlessly seeks methods of migration such as studying abroad, marriage migration, and skilled worker migration.

Among the methods of immigration, studying abroad is considered a relatively easy method, and quite many young Iranians study English in hope of studying abroad. “We deliver what we promise!” This slogan was inscribed on the wall of a famous private English academy. Because of the economic recession and governmental control being continued since 2000, those in the younger generation, particularly the highly educated, dream of continuing their studies abroad. In Iranian society, they cannot show their authentic *selves* due to cultural and political constraints. The young Iranians have despaired in the reality controlled in numerous ways. The youth and the reformists are dissatisfied with the government and society in general and have shown self-mocking and hopeless attitudes about Iran's isolation in world politics. Especially in the Green Movement, an anti-governmental protest that arose before and after the 2009 presidential election, the urban youth vented that they could no longer find hope, and it was not hard to spot those who decided to leave their home country with Iran's hazy future (Koo, 2017).

For instance, C, aged 22, participated quite actively in the anti-government movement when the instability arose after the 2009 presidential election. Since he had

enthusiastically joined the protest, he was later classified as *siyasi* (translated into politics, interpreted as activist) at school and was expelled. Because of this problem, C's mother seriously considered immigrating to Malaysia. Eventually, he left for Malaysia in 2010 to study there. Though he had dreamed of migrating to Canada or the U.K. originally, the visa obtainment was hindered by Iran's nuclear issue in 2010 so that Muslim countries such as Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates substituted the Western countries as destinations.

Furthermore, D (female, aged 20 at the time), who had also actively participated the protest during the 2009 Green Movement, once registered herself on an international babysitter agency website for potential jobs in Europe with the mere hope of leaving Iran. She now studies in France. The Green Movement was especially an enormous shock to the reformist youth in Iran, and many of those who had high hopes for the new social reform came to a decision to leave home. The socially controlled environment and the 2009 uprising once again led the young Iranians to seek specific means of immigration.

Due to these young Iranians who are on the alert for an opportunity to go abroad, popular English academies in Tehran are full of enrolled students, and it is not hard to find hundreds of students queued up for twelve hours to register for IELTS (International English Language Testing System) needed for studying in Canada or Australia. The two major English academies that I attended for over eight months in 2009 were always crowded with young housewives dreaming of immigration, undergraduate and graduate students wishing to study abroad, and professionals preparing for professional migration through employment. Many young Iranians take the most ideal countries to be the U.S. and Canada, with Australia as their second choice, as the visa obtainment is relatively easier. Although the U.S. visa is the hardest to obtain, there are quite many people who try the U.S. visa lottery since it is the most desired country. Some choose alternatives of Southeast Asian Islamic countries (Malaysia and Indonesia) or India.

Many students stay in Malaysia in diverse forms varying from short-term language training to long-term studying abroad because Iranians can use English there and obtain Malaysian visas relatively easily. Also, due to the heated competition in entering domestic graduate schools, going for language training or graduate school in Malaysia have become other alternatives for young Iranians who have become jobless suddenly.

Lastly, let us examine Iran's economic situation, which is pointed out as the biggest reason for the recent large-scale migration. Iran's high unemployment rate is explained as the most influential reason for people to dream of migration and studying abroad. High unemployment rate causes many different social problems, and this issue is not only seen as a crisis for the young generation but also acknowledged as a national threat. The difficulty in job searching demands young Iranians, especially young female Iranians, even higher educational background. Entering master's programs and doctorate programs is as competitive as entering college, and it is not rare for applicants to try a second or third time to get into graduate school.

As Salehi-Isfahani argues, Iran's educational institutions are reduced to gigantic factories for degrees rather than fostering talented workers that corporations or

companies want, and it is a salient phenomenon that jobless students are absorbed into higher educational institutions such as graduate schools (Salehi-Isfahani, 2011). In the past ten years, the rate of students going on to graduate school from college has doubled. A total of 830,000 students applied for the graduate school entrance exam in 2010, and only 6% of them entered graduate school. Yet, succeeding to enter graduate school against stiff competition does not guarantee one’s employment. It only temporarily defers one’s state of unemployment. Furthermore, unless they are professionals, even those with high education cannot easily find jobs that match their majors. Many young people other than professionals or public servants succeed the family business or are self-employed. As more parents invested in their children’s education due to the decrease in birth rates in the past two decades, the education market expanded rapidly (Salehi-Isfahani, 2011). However, high education does not mean the unemployment rate will fall. The unemployment rate of university graduates increased from the statistics in 1997 (male 18.2%, female 18.5%) to those in 2007 (male 22.4%, female 52.6%). Currently, the unemployment rate in Iran comes close to 30%, at 29.2% as of January 2017, and comparing this to the overall unemployment rate of Iran, which is 12.5%, the youth unemployment rate appears even graver.

Though expectations for Iran’s economic growth have risen with the economic sanctions lifted, the realities are still not so kind. There are high hopes for market liberation and completion of nuclear negotiations in Iran, but the emergence of President Donald Trump cast a red light to Iran’s economic situation. As Trump won the U.S. presidential election and the U.S. senate prolonged the Iran Sanctions Act (ISA) for another decade in 2016, Iran’s exchange rate market swung and the polarization of the rich and the poor aggravated (Koo, 2017).

The migration issue in Iran has another huge strand of the political and social background, other than the economic situation. Through more than a decade of economic sanctions and the powerful control of President Ahmadinejad’s Islamic Republic, many Iranians attempted to leave their home country. In sum, the four backgrounds of migration examined in the third section are in fact different depending on individuals, rather complexly entangled. The fourth section will discuss the brain drain issue of Iran as an aspect of Iranian immigration.

15.4 Iran’s Brain Drain Phenomenon

<Case 5>

Researcher: How are you doing these days?

R: I received a master’s degree in law before, and now I’m pursuing a degree in business administration.

Researcher: You started studying another major?

R: (Laughing as if in embarrassment) Yeah. Just a typical Iranian behavior. Ha ha. Don’t you think Iranians earn their degrees as hobbies? After you get the master’s in law, there is

no hope. And then you study business administration, get a Ph.D., and then start studying another area because it's so hard to get a job.

Researcher: (Greeting his girlfriend next to him) Is your girlfriend at a job?

R: Ha ha. No. She's starting to study another major, too.

(R, male, in his thirties, child of a diplomat)

An informant I had not met since my long-term field research in 2009 and met again in 2017 gave me the updates in embarrassment. In Iran, it is not at all a rare thing for the upper middle class to receive more than two master's degrees and then going on to doctorate programs or trying more than two years to get into master's programs. The college entrance system, called *concours*, is the utmost concern for parents, and the educational fervor in Iran is so high that it is considered ordinary to take classes at academies or private tutoring for high performance at the *concours*.

The academic background in Iran becomes a barometer for the parents' face and honor, other than being the proof of individuals' achievement or development. In Iranian society where the family power and bond are strong, the children's great academic backgrounds and occupations become the parent's biggest source of pride. Thus, the educational fervor in Iranian society does not simply connect to the economic situation, but links to the honor of individuals and of the family by extension, so that academic background in Iran is traditionally given high values.

However, the overheated fervor for education in recent times can only be seen because of Iran's poor economic situation, which has been continued for over fifteen years. According to the November 10, 2016 article of *Financial Tribune*, an English newspaper in Iran, a survey of 232 students at University of Tehran showed that over 64% of the students are considering overseas migration for *whichever reason*.⁶ Also, considering the fact that the number of Iranian students studying abroad has recorded 431,000 in 2010 and 2011⁷ and about 200,000 highly educated people have left Iran as of 2016, we can clearly see the prevailing brain drain phenomenon in Iranian society and a high desire for migration among the people.

The term brain drain first appeared in a report by the Royal Society of London in 1963. It was a term given to the large-scale migration of British scientists to the U.S. In general, brain drain refers to "permanent or long-term international emigration of skilled people who have been the subject of considerable educational investment by their own societies" in developing countries (Salami et al., 2011). The problem of brain drain became a more serious issue in the 1960s not limited to Europe, as the phenomenon of personnel with high technical training migrating from developing countries to advanced countries accelerated over a long period of time. The emigration of highly educated talents has a high influence over a country's research capacity and competitiveness. However, since the Iranian society has limitations of political

⁶ "Brain Drain Continues in Iran", *Financial Tribune*, 10 November 2016. <https://financialtribune.com/articles/people/53254/brain-drain-continues>.

⁷ World Bank Group, Migration and Remittances Factbook 2016 (<https://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPROSPECTS/Resources/3349341199807908806/45490251450455807487/Factbookpart1.pdf>).

and economic situations for brain circulation to happen or have the elite migrate back, this study will concentrate on the brain drain phenomenon.

According to the World Bank’s report “The Migration and Remittances Factbook 2011”, Iranian immigrants as of 2010 amount to 1,295,100, taking up 1.7% of the entire population. Major countries of destination are reported to be Qatar, Canada, Kuwait, Germany, Israel, the U.K., Sweden, the U.A.E., and Bahrain. The migration rate of highly educated population is particularly prominent, as 14.5% of the overall highly educated Iranians appear to have migrated overseas as of 2000. The migration rate of elites and professionals is so high that the rate of doctors educated in Iranian medical school and migrated abroad is ranked among the top ten in the world (6,101 persons, 8.4% of all doctors as of 2010). According to Esfandiari (2004)’s article “Iran: Coping with The World’s Highest Rate of Brain Drain”, 150,000 to 180,000 highly educated young Iranians are leaving for North America annually, mostly citing high domestic unemployment and absence of freedom as the reasons. From the position of Iranian government that supports the tuition of all professionals, the brain drain is a great economic and social loss. The brain drain to the U.S. shows the highest rate of Iranians among Asians who migrated to the U.S. for education (Torbat, 2002), while an IMF report states that over 250,000 Iranian engineers and doctors reside in the U.S. only and that the other 170,000 are migrants with high academic backgrounds (Chaichian, 2012). Most young doctors I met during my field research in 2009 were preparing for the medical licensing examinations of the U.S. or Australia, and all five doctors who were preparing for studying abroad then have now passed the exam in the U.S. and finished their residencies.

<Case 6>

Think about it. All national universities in Iran exempt you from everything, be it dormitory fee or tuition. In case of medical school, the government supports seven years of tuition, but medical students these days only think of leaving to the U.S., Canada, or Australia. All the highly trained personnel who graduate from domestic universities only think of going abroad once they can get the chance, so how much of a national loss is it? Also, when they go abroad, how much money should their parents send them? Of course, it’s a result brought by the Islamic Republic upon itself. (Male, aged 26, medical student)

The Iranian community has the highest average level of education among migrant communities, and the salient phenomenon of doctors and professors’ migration serves as a proof of Iranian economic loss (Torbat, 2002, p. 273). When medical students finish school with all tuition waived, they have two or three years of mandatory social service period, but most people prepare for migration to the West after just fulfilling the service obligation. It is due to this tendency that Iranian society continues to face problems caused by the brain drain as well as the economic loss caused by parents sending funds for studying or living abroad. In the background for the migration of the elite population including doctors, there are factors such as poor working conditions and low wage that play a large role. Australia is inducing the migration of Iranian doctors, offering housing, cars, high wage, and lesser working days. The brain drain of doctors in the present Iranian society is grave, as people say things like “The only remaining doctors in Iran are so unskilled that they can only treat simple colds” and “Europe takes all doctors from Iran as soon as they graduate.”

Lastly, let us examine what kind of choice the young Iranians make after they receive degrees abroad. With an annual census of individuals who receive doctorate degrees in U.S. universities presented by the National Science Foundation of the U.S., “2015 Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities”, we can estimate the situation after brain drain through the rate of Iranians who earned their degrees in the U.S. and those who remained there. Iran is placed at eighth among the top ten countries (with Korea at third) of foreigners receiving doctorate degrees in the U.S. from 2005 to 2015. The 2015 statistics in particular show Iran ranked fourth after China, India, and Korea among all countries of origin for foreigners who received doctorate degrees.

This study examined the brain drain issue of elite migration in different forms of immigration in Iranian society. Iran’s human resources and talent are acknowledged for their abilities in the world, as Iranians performed well in the International Mathematical Olympiad, the International Astronomy Olympiad, and the International Science Olympiad in the year of 2017. Compared to other developing countries, Iran invests much higher costs in education, spending 20% of the governmental budget and 5% of GDP on education (Nash & Sasmaz, 2011). Despite the national concern, effort, and investment, many Iranians face the reality of leaving their home due to the debilitation of domestic foundation businesses, economic difficulties, and the problem of controlled society. More specific and realistic measures are needed on the national level and worries for management of and investment for Iran’s human resources are being endlessly raised within the country.

15.5 Conclusion

Iranian society has been facing a grave economic situation since 2017 and is encountering a national crisis so that national donation is called upon for the first time since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. In March 2020, Iran even appealed to IMF for a rapid financial assistance of \$5 billion for the first time in 41 years. The Iranian people are complaining of mass depression due to a train of misfortunes, and overall medical and psychological crises in society are looming as domestic violence and child abuse cases are increasingly reported. Despite the government’s efforts including mass text messages promoting hotlines for domestic violence, there are unfortunate cases where families are falling apart due to the national crisis. Iran, having spent recent years of unprecedented difficulties even before the COVID-19 pandemic, faces severe aftermath of the pandemic that does not easily die out. Most of all, what become clearer is that trust is waning between the Iranian government and the people as misfortunes continue. In such a context, the desire for overseas migration is stronger than ever in Iran, but migration is becoming more difficult as time goes by with the seriousness of COVID-19 in Iran. Therefore, though the young generation longs for immigration, the conditions given to them have aggravated even further. The immigration problem in Iran is thus a social issue that illustrates both social change and conflict situation.

Young Iranians see themselves as hostages held in the grand prison of their country. They dream of breaking away from the day-to-day politics of surveillance and control and escaping to foreign countries that are like virtual worlds in their reality. The foreign countries they dream of are those of imagination, not any different from the ideals of utopian Islam community that their state presents. This study examined the Iranian young who dream of studying and relocating abroad and the reality that they do not return even after finishing their studies and earning their degrees. However, those who can leave to study only make up a minor percentage, since the opportunity for overseas migration also returns to the class issue which dictates that the larger population of young Iranians are trapped in society like birds in cages, forced to face their depressing actualities.

It appears that this is the time for Iranian society to acknowledge the brain drain as a more serious social problem and consider more active solutions for dealing with the social issues that serve as the background for the outflow of talent. The Iranian government should not just criticize the young generation for wishing to escape from Iran only if they could, but earnestly reflect on why outstanding young people of ability choose tougher lives in foreign countries away from home and why they do not wish to return home even after finishing their studies, in order to prepare countermeasures.

The anti-government protests that broke out all over Iran following the economic crises of 2017 and 2018 represents Iran's current reality in its totality. These more recent protests, unlike the Green Movement of 2009, were not led by the secular, revolutionary young generation but instead sporadically arose in small provincial cities and rural areas. Inflation after consecutive earthquakes and high unemployment rate were direct causes among others, but it is significant that the enraged cries of these protestors targeted not only the economy but the basis of the Islamic system, clamoring for “death to the dictator”. Although the voices of middle to lower classes in provinces with traditionally conservative and pro-government tendencies were much larger, the voices eventually encompassed different classes, political positions, and religious stances as they jointly criticized the Islamic regime. This, again, calls for attention to the cries of various demands for social reforms within Iran.

On the other hand, immigration to Western countries does not only serve utopian realities to Iranian immigrants. Not all Iranians with high educational backgrounds, who take up a considerable part of the overall immigrant population, can choose occupations in the U.S. or Europe that are compatible with their levels of education, and many suffer from mental and economic difficulties. As discussed above, many Iranian brains embarked on their studies abroad with high hopes and dreams but face prevalent discriminations against migrants and Muslim people in both North American and European societies, and this also calls forth diverse social problems. This study on overseas migration and brain drain must be linked to research on the Iranian diaspora. It should be noted that this linkage to diaspora studies remains an important task, especially in the reality where the Iranian diaspora has a profound impact on the reformists in Iranian society and operates as a strong force upon popular culture and mass media.

Acknowledgements This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2020S1A5A8041154). This chapter is an expanded and revised version of “‘I Will Leave this Country, if I Can!’: An Anthropological Analysis on the Migration of Highly educated Iranians (Korean Cultural Anthropology vol.51 no.1)” a paper published in Korean.

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