

The Armenian community in Iran: Issues and emigration

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Abstract: *The Armenian-Iranian community has a history of around 400 years. According to official statistics, there were approximately 300 000 Armenians in Iran in 1960-1970. After the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1978-1979, a considerable number of Armenians fled from Iran. In addition, other reasons fuelling the emigration were the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, the international sanctions against Iran and the harsh social-economic conditions in the country. Many Armenians remaining in Iran mostly live in the three communities of Tabriz, Tehran and Isfahan. Armenians are recognised by the state as a religious minority. The Constitution of Iran gives rights of domestic, cultural and religious autonomy to Armenians. At the same time, Islamic laws dictate certain limitations, notably in the spheres of equal employment opportunities, the court system and justice. Armenians in Iran adopt several approaches for retaining their Armenian identities, including the non-acceptance of mixed marriages. After the Islamic revolution, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society started to organise and support the emigration of Jews and other non-Muslim groups, thus propelling the next wave of the Iranian-Armenians' exodus.*

Key words: *Iran; Armenian community; Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society; Christians; religious minorities; emigration; rights; Islamic revolution*

1 Introduction

Armenia, situated at the crossroads between the east and the west, has always been in the midst of conflicts. For centuries, Armenians tried to stay away from clashes and took refuge in more secure places. There were also cases in the history when Armenians were forcefully deported from their lands. These are the two main ways of formation of the Armenian diaspora. Interestingly, in the foreign territories Armenians prefer living alongside each other, thus creating space and opportunities for building Armenian Apostolic churches, establishing Armenian schools, and so forth, to resist assimilation. After the establishment of these communities, the next issue was their institutionalisation in order to create a self-sufficient system to solve potential problems.

This article undertakes to present the establishment and the subsequent movements of the Armenian community in Iran. During the history, Iranian-Armenians succeeded in forming diocese bodies that solved numerous issues in the community. All three Armenian dioceses in Iran

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had councils of delegates with the main mission of dealing with administrative, national, clerical, educational and territorial issues of the dioceses. The councils also provide certificates of baptism, marriage, death, and so forth, and handle wills and adoptions of children. In case of civil cases, the community deals with these domestically, while criminal cases are within the domain of the legislation of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Armenians participate in all elections in Iran. Armenians vote within the boundaries of their community, either in a church or other community building. Armenians can be elected during the election to the *Majlis* (Parliament).

The article aims to present the current situation and status of the Armenian community in Iran, their privileges and limitations. It also focuses on the present issues of the communities and the main reasons for the emigration of Armenians from Iran.

2 Methodology

In addition to extensive desk research, the author conducted both a field trip to Iran for qualitative in-depth interviews with key informants and organised a snap web-based quantitative survey as a secondary data source to validate the results.

The desk research made use of the available literature, Iranian-Armenian electronic resources and media outlets, and laid a solid base for the application of the historical comparative approach to the article.

The qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted in 2014, when the author visited the Islamic Republic of Iran and met with the following persons: the leaders of the Tehran, Isfahan and Tabriz dioceses; the deputies to the Iranian *Majlis* of Armenian origin; representatives of the council of delegates; and the editor-in-chief of the major Iranian-Armenian newspaper, *Aliq*. The standard question in-depth interviews focused on the Armenian community in Iran, their issues and the reasons for their emigration from the country.

The quantitative web-based survey was implemented during March to June 2018 and targeted those Iranian-Armenians that had emigrated from Iran. The topic of the survey was anchored on the reasons that forced them to leave the country, including aspects of their occupation in Iran before emigration, the issues they had to overcome in the new host country, and so forth. The survey was widely circulated on social networks, sent to the specific hubs of concentration of ex-Iranian citizens of Armenian origin (such as churches and community clubs) and also directly messaged to the targeted people through personal networks. Over 100 people responded to the survey in either the English or Armenian languages.

Remarkably, for centuries the main institution to bring them together and solve their issues has been the Apostolic Church. Another channel was the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (the Dashnak party), since a considerable section of Iranian-Armenians belonged to this party. Both these centres of gravity have a global spread, and even when Armenians fled Iran after the Islamic revolution, these two institutions were a source of support. This factor played a significant role to relieve the harsh situation of the migrants.

3 Deportation to Iran

The Armenian-Iranian community has a history of around 400 years. In 1604 Safavid Shah Abbas the First deported more than 500 000 Armenians to Iran. Of these, 20 000 to 30 000 Armenian families were placed in the northern regions of Iran, namely, Gilan and Mazandaran (Waterfield 1973: 63), and the rest were moved to the south. The first Armenian community in Iran was established near Isfahan. The place was named Nor Jugha (New Julfa, after the home town of some of the deportees). This evolved into a community with a strong institutional structure. Through the years the Armenian community grew and divided into three groups governed by three dioceses: Atrpatakan (residence in Tabriz), Tehran and Isfahan.

By means of a special decree, Abbas the First allocated lands in the southern part of Isfahan and Armenians constructed the town of New Julfa. Shah Abbas the First instituted a special policy for the deported Armenian population in order to give them the opportunity to take root in Iranian soil by presenting them with many privileges. Thanks to Armenians, the culture in the country developed, trade became more active given the foreign language knowledge of Armenians and their experience in the Silk Road trade, and artisanship and small production advanced substantially.

However, during the later reign of Iranian Shah Sultan Huseyin (1694-1722), the policy of Savafids changed and they not only imposed high taxes on Armenians, but also attempted to forcefully Islamise the Christian Armenians. These factors became the first major impetus for migration from Iran. In the eighteenth century, a considerable number of Armenians left for Constantinople, Smyrna, Aleppo, also further to European and Asian countries such as Italy, France, The Netherlands, Poland, Russia, India, Burma and Indonesia (Bayburtyan 1969). Since the middle of the eighteenth century the Iranian-Armenian community started to dwindle, promptly filling the ranks of the Armenian communities in the Europe.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid the Second organised mass ethnic cleanings of Armenians in Western Armenia, that is, the regions in the Ottoman empire neighbouring Iran. During these *pogroms*, the Iranian government permitted Armenian refugees to cross the Iranian border without hindrance to find shelter in Iran. The same scenario was repeated in the 1915 to 1923 genocide of Armenians in the Ottoman empire. Iran hosted the refugee Armenians and thus the Armenian community of Iran was replenished.

Some time later, in 1915 to 1916, the Persian-Armenian Council was established in Iran. It was considered the highest body of Iranian Armenians. Indeed, the Council played a major salutary role for the endangered Armenian population (Bayburtyan 2013: 25). With its petitions, the Persian Council reached a point where the Iranian government promised protection both to its citizens and to those Western Armenians that had crossed its border and taken refuge in the country.

The number of Iranian-Armenians significantly increased after the genocide due to the inflow of Western Armenians. Iran not only gave protection but also supported the Armenians by granting guarantees of life and property. Later, in 1935, the government of Iran adopted the

Assembly of Laws on Family and Heritage of Iranian Armenians to guide the community leadership in their domestic issues.

Although Armenians received the right of being represented in the Iranian *Majlis* after the 1905-1911 constitutional revolution, after 1915, given the increase rise in the Armenian community, they were entitled to two seats in parliament.

According to official statistics, in 1960-1970 there were approximately 300 000 Armenians in Iran. Armenians had their schools, sports and cultural clubs. Some of Tehran's most famous pieces of architecture – Hasanabad Square, the Foreign Ministry building, and the Golestan and Marmar palaces – were the work of Armenian architects. Before 1979, Armenian bars and cafes were very popular, and many famous personalities in the arts – music, dance, cinema, theatre and sculpture – came from the community (Stepanian 2010). According to the Armenian *Majlis* representative of Tehran and northern Armenian communities, Karen Khanlaryan, about 30 years ago 5 per cent of dentists and 3 per cent of all doctors in Tehran were of Armenian origin: 'As of now, we have a retreat in the area of medicine' (Interview with Khanlaryan).

Today Armenians have a reputation for quality work in business, food production and automobile repairs. Like other religious minorities, they cannot hold sensitive military or government positions, but some occupy senior positions as managers and engineers in state-run construction projects and industries.

Armenians also enjoy unofficial fame for producing homemade alcohol. Although strictly prohibited by Iranian law, the practice is tolerated as long as it is for consumption within the Armenian community. In Islamic Iran, the highest praise one can give to a glass of homemade wine, vodka or beer is 'Armenian' – even if it was made by someone else (Stepanian 2010).

However, after the Islamic revolution in Iran of 1978 to 1979, a considerable number of Armenians fled Iran as Christian Armenians feared that they would be accused of loyalty to the shah with subsequent expropriation and punishment.

Thus, although Khomeini gave verbal assurances that the rights of Iranian-Armenians would be respected (Hovhannisyan 2012: 72-73), almost half of the Armenian population left Iran. One thing was clear, and that is that a number of employment opportunities would not be available to non-Muslims. Armenians were regarded as a religious minority in Iran.

Despite efforts by the Islamic Republic of Iran to create conducive conditions for the non-Muslim population, Islamic laws dictate certain limitations. The most notorious of these are the following:

- (a) Employment: There are limitations on certain types of work. For example, a non-Muslim cannot become a judge, cannot achieve a high rank in the armed forces, and cannot become a Minister or work for the administration of the President.
- (b) Heritage: A non-Muslim cannot inherit from a Muslim, and if a person from a non-Muslim family adopts Islam, the other non-Muslim relatives are deprived of inheritance rights.
- (c) The Criminal Code distinguishes between a Muslim and a non-Muslim, for example, in the case of the *diya*, that is, financial compensation, the payment of

the blood money/ransom in case of manslaughter. However, the courts try to find ways of compensating based on equality and equity.

- (d) According to Islamic law, only a Muslim can be a witness. This law is reflected in procedural laws, hence it may be assumed that testimony by a non-Muslim can be disregarded during court hearings (Khaloyan 2013: 145-146).

According to Noel Minasyan, the Chairperson of the Council of Delegates of the diocese,

[t]here [were] more than 15 000 Armenian population in the 14 villages of Southern Iran before 1946. Unfortunately, today there is very small Armenian presence in Peria. One part migrated to Armenia, others to Isfahan and Tehran. After the Islamic revolution, many of them fled the country finding refuge in the West (Interview with Minasyan).

All these factors contributed to the emigration of Iranian-Armenians after the Islamic revolution. These settled mainly in the United States, France and other European countries with large Armenian communities.

In addition to the Islamic revolution, the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988 (during the war with Iraq, Armenians fought alongside other Iranians, and around 300 were killed, disabled or captured by Iraqi forces), the international sanctions against Iran and hence the harsh social-economic conditions in the country were among other reasons fuelling the emigration.

However, not the entire Armenian population left Iran after the revolution. There are many Armenians in Iran today that, as during the term of the shah, mostly live in the three communities. Article 13 of the Constitution of Iran gives rights of domestic cultural and religious autonomy to Iranian-Armenians (Pahlevanyan 1997: 19). Armenians marry and get divorced, inherit and adopt children according to the Armenian Apostolic Church laws and traditions within the community. According to article 14 of the Constitution, the government of Iran and Muslims are obliged to display kind, sympathetic and just behaviour towards non-Muslims and respect their human rights. This principle is applied with respect to those citizens that do not plot against Islam and the Islamic Republic Constitution.

Armenians mainly reside in cities and large towns, such as Tehran, Isfahan, Tabriz, Urmia and Arak. As mentioned, Armenians are regarded as a religious minority by the state. Religious minorities are entitled to five seats in the Iranian Parliament: two for Armenians; one to Jews; one to Zoroastrians; and one to Assyrian and Chaldean by rotation. This was one of the articles (article 64) in the shah Iran Constitution that was preserved after the Islamic revolution of 1978-1979 and moved to the Constitution of Iran (Pahlevanyan 1997: 20). One of the Armenian members of the *Majlis* is elected from the northern and one from the southern diocese. The representative of Atrpatakan and Tehran dioceses in the tenth *Majlis* is Karen Khanlaryan, and the representative of Isfahan Armenians is Zhorzhik Abrahamyan.

4 Situation in three Iranian-Armenian dioceses and current problems

The Armenian Apostolic Church has three dioceses in Iran: the Tehran or Central diocese (the youngest and the most populous); the Isfahan and Southern Iran diocese; and the Atrpatakan diocese.

4.1 Tehran or Central diocese

The Armenian community in Tehran was established in the 1940s. It has the largest number of members in Iran. The first paragraph of the Charter of the Tehran diocese presents their mission and process of activity implementation.

According to the main and civil laws of Iran, the Iranian-Armenians, adhering to the laws of the country and being recognised as religious community, has the freedom of religion, beliefs and ceremonies, the rights to teach its religion, language and traditional culture, as well as to have its special representatives to the parliament. In the personal issues, it adheres to the religious and confession laws and indisputable traditions that serve as basis to manage the clerical, religious and educational affairs through relevant councils and bodies (Prelacy website).

The council of diocese has its bodies to implement the functions. For example, there is an educational council to monitor the schools, and the property council and judiciary council to deal with family issues of the congregation, such as divorce and heritage (interview with Archbishop Sepuh). There are eight Armenian churches in Tehran.

There are approximately 25 Armenian schools in Tehran with about 7 000 students. A number of sporting-cultural unions operate in Tehran, and many periodicals are published. One of the most widely known is *Aliq Daily*.

However, there are several problems in the Tehran diocese, the largest one perhaps being emigration. Although the main reason is the socio-economic situation in Iran, Armenians in Tehran note that other issues present in the community fuel the emigration.

The main concern of Tehran Armenians is the lack of information and transparency in relation to the property of the Prelacy. Today many Iranian-Armenians demand from the council of delegates to present a list of properties owned by the Prelacy. In the case of some being sold, the community wants to be informed of the price and the aim for which the money will be spent. So far this issue has not been resolved, since the Prelacy finds that it is within its legal framework. However, Iranian-Armenians demand a more transparent method of operation.

4.2 The diocese of Isfahan and Southern Iran (Irano-Indian diocese)

The Irano-Indian diocese was formed in 1606 through the direct initiative of Shah Abbas the First when establishing New Julfa. Today, the centre of the diocese is the St All Saviour Monastery of Isfahan, one of the famous and beautifully-erected monuments of Armenian cultural history. The diocese used to have more than 100 churches, but currently only 24 function, including 13 only in New Julfa.

There has been the chair of Armenian studies in the Isfahan University since 1961. It has been of great importance for the formation of the Iranian-Armenian academic elite. It was established with state sponsorship and the state continues to support it. It also play an important great role in the continuous training of Iranian-Armenian teachers.

The community faces other issues, such as the problem of retaining the Armenian identity. It is hoped that this will be overcome with support from Armenia. The community makes efforts in this area by organising classes of poetry, acting and dancing with invited teachers from Armenia. However, both locally and in Tehran these are self-funded projects, namely, the communities pay from their own budgets. The Isfahan diocese is perhaps the second most wealthy Armenian community in the whole region, with Antelias (Armenian Church Cathilicosate of Cilicia in Antelias-Lebanon) being the first.

4.3 Northern or Tabriz diocese (Armenian diocese of Atrpatakan)

The Armenian diocese of Atrpatakan is the oldest Iranian-Armenian diocese and it unites Armenians residing in the northern provinces. Administratively, it includes the provinces of Eastern and Western Atrpatakan, and Ardebil. According to Garnik Badalyan, approximately 5 000 Armenians reside in this area, whereas in the beginning of the twentieth century the diocese had 30 000 members. After the repatriation movement to Soviet Armenia in 1946-1948, this number dropped to 17 000 (Badalyan 2011: 94-95). Therefore, although the Atrpatakan diocese used to be the most populous Armenian region, the situation has changed. This diocese has the highest emigration rate as compared to the other two dioceses. In addition to the issues present in the other dioceses, namely, harsh social-economic conditions and a lack of employment opportunities, there is another problem in Atrpatakan which is unique to the area. The number of Turkic-speaking Iranians is the highest in the population of Atrpatakan, and the local Armenians constantly face this issue. For example, local Armenians are not able to properly conduct their festive or mourning ceremonies.

The leader of the Atrpatakan diocese, Archimandrit Grigor Chiftchyan, openly mentions other issues in the diocese:

Absence of employment and economic hardships that were aggravated especially during the last two years create adverse situation for the youth for both staying in the area and marrying. We have got many students with bachelor and master's degrees that look for jobs and often apply to us. We hope to raise this issue at the special state committee on minorities to support this need (interview with Archimandrite Chiftchyan).

Thus, in sum, the diocese of Tabriz, while being one of the oldest Iranian-Armenian communities and hosting more than 100 churches and vast properties, today faces gradual devastation. The Armenians of Atrpatakan prefer to settle in Tehran or other cities, or opt for emigration, mostly to the west. Today the issue of the preservation of Armenian schools in Atrpatakan is acute since there are not enough students to justify their functioning.

In general, Iranian-Armenians today face serious challenges. Since the number of Iranian-Armenians has largely decreased, Armenian pre-schools and schools in Iran are being closed. Moreover, the Armenian schools

succumb in quality to Iranian schools, and as a result an Iranian-Armenian adolescent has less chance to enter a university if graduated from an Armenian school.

According to the leader of the Tabriz diocese, Archbishop Sepuh, the main issue of the Armenians in Iran is the educational life where we have difficulties; the state sometimes supports us, and sometimes – not. Sometimes the difficulties stay as such despite our numerous petitions. They show us outwardly friendliness but I would not claim that there is a special policy to ease our situation in spite the created impression (interview with Archbishop Sepuh).

These issues are present in all three dioceses. It is worth nothing that the Iranian-Armenian community, after having lived in Iran for so many years, has come up with a self-preservation and non-assimilation mechanism of non-intervention in the domestic cultural processes, as well as by strictly prohibiting a marriage between an Armenian and a foreigner, especially a non-Christian. This is perhaps the most important factor for self-preservation.

The last point has often been mentioned by Iranian-Armenian political and cultural actors interviewed for the article. Although the question may be simple and logical in both the European and US communities, there is a very harsh response to this issue in Iran. Notably, Armenians marry persons of other nationalities in Turkey and Arab countries, but not in Iran. Ninety-nine per cent of respondents were men above the age of 40 years, and 100 per cent answered in the negative to the following question: ‘What is the attitude of the community towards a marriage of an Armenian and a non-Armenian, and if that person can stay as a member of the community?’

Individual conversations with community members revealed that such marriages do take place but the newly-weds are always expelled from the community. The problem is that not only that person but also their children are not accepted by the community. According to Karen Khanlaryan:

Muslims also do not welcome marriages with non-Muslims. Later, their children are not accepted by our community, and have issues with ethnic and religious identity, they get marry with difficulties. These marginalised families are often destined to decay. I think that especially the church should express special care towards this problem (interview with Khanlaryan).

Another interesting fact is that, in order to maintain its cultural front, Iranian-Armenians try not to become involved in Persian or Muslim culture. This hypothesis was tested during the field research and non-formal interviews with representatives of the Armenian community. These conversations revealed that most Iranian-Armenians did not watch Iranian films and were not aware of globally-famous films such as *Divorce Iranian style*, *Two women*, *My Tehran for sale*, *Children of heaven*, *About Elly*, *The Salesman* and others, and were not even interested in Iranian arts and culture as such. Thus, despite the fact that they reside in Iran, Iranian-Armenians try to limit their perceptions on cinema and theatre as another strategy to maintain their identity.

The Armenian parliamentarian at the IRI *Majlis*, Karen Khanlaryan, argues that Armenian ‘community life is limited because it is based on

amateurism, ie non-professional system as a result of not sufficient funds'. He adds that Armenians try not to have any contact with Iranian art and culture, and do their best to study and engage with Armenian art and culture by cooperating with the Republic of Armenia. Hence, Iranian-Armenians try to evade assimilation by behaving as closed societies or ghettos.

5 Emigration of Armenians from the Islamic Republic of Iran

Emigration from Iran reached a large scale after the Islamic revolution. The revolution and the events that followed, including the establishment of an Islamic government following Shari'a law and the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq, served as catalysts for a mass exodus of much of Iran's established middle class. By 1988, the World Refugee Survey reported Iran to be tenth among countries with the highest source of refugees. Iranians who immigrated to the United States after the revolution were different from those who had done so in the preceding 25 years. The new immigrants no longer were principally individual students and professionals, but middle and upper-class families, most of whom were political refugees and exiles. They were diverse in their religious, political and ethnic background and their reasons for leaving Iran varied. They included families associated with the previous regime as members of the government and the military, and owners of large businesses. This second wave also included a disproportionately high number of ethnic and religious minorities such as Sunni Muslims, Christians, Jews, Baha'is and Zoroastrians, all of whom left in fear of religious persecution (Iranian Americans).

In the 1980s the Armenian population was estimated at around 200 0000, but there are no reliable updated statistics on their numbers since the recent upsurge in emigration began (Stepanian 2010). The emigration of Armenians was not an exodus from motherland, as most Armenians generally view Iran as their birth place. Iranian-Armenians residing here consider themselves the descendants of those deported to Iran throughout history.

Unfortunately, Armenia was not always the destination of Armenian emigrants from Iran after the Islamic revolution and Iran-Iraq war. It is most probably related to the non-stable socio-economic situation in Armenia, a certain level of corruption, a lack of justice and the absence of a resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The influx of Iranian-Armenians into Armenia is much lower in comparison to their flow to the United States, Germany and France, which have a rich history of accommodating Armenian communities. During the first years of independence of the Republic of Armenia, a substantial section of Iranian-Armenians decided to view Armenia as their destination. However, after some time most of these emigrated from Armenia due to harsh social conditions.

As is the case with other citizens of Iran, before the Islamic revolution Armenians migrated from Iran for better education opportunities, whereas after the revolution there were a plethora of reasons to leave. At the same time it seemed that after the Iran-Iraq war the emigration wave dropped and those Armenians that stayed up to that point had already accustomed

themselves to the situation and would remain in the country. However, after the Islamic revolution the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS),¹ an organisation registered in the United States, started to organise and support the emigration of Jews from Iran. They later started facilitating the emigration of other non-Muslim groups, thus propelling the next wave of Iranian-Armenians' exodus. In general, they transfer non-Muslims to the west and later work on their family reunification. When discussing the reasons and the supporting factors of the Armenian emigration, the leader of Isfahan diocese, Bishop Babken Charyan, says the following:

The problem of Armenians' emigration is rather immense in all three dioceses. They leave mostly to the West. The Jewish HIAS organisation organises the logistical issues of moving Armenians to the West for little price and thus works towards de-Armenising Iran, as a way to accomplish their shadowy plans. Even the Iranian government is not able to stop the activities of this organisation (interview with Archbishop Charyan).

While not traditionally considered refugees, the US Congress created a special refugee status for religious minorities from the former Soviet Union, which now allows for the resettlement of Jews, Christians and Baha'is from Iran (HIAS: History). As a matter of fact, their official mission is to support and provide aid to the immigrants and refugees. According to the open information, the US government allocates around US \$3 million to HIAS in order to support the exodus of non-Muslim religious minorities from Iran. Thus, most of the Armenian and Assyrian emigrants of the mid-1990s up to 2015 have left Iran through this organisation.

When the application is approved, HIAS pays US \$3 000 for each family member, and then they all travel to Austria where they stay until all the legalities have been finalised and they can then leave for the United States (Stepanian 2010). Iranian hardliners naturally view HIAS with suspicion, but the country's government has turned a blind eye to this channel of emigration, since in principle ridding the country of non-Muslims without major repercussions is convenient to Iranese authorities. According to the representatives of the Iranian-Armenian community, approximately 6 000 Armenians have left Iran for the United States through HIAS (Jewish Support to Iranian-Armenians to migrate to the US 2008).

The HIAS has discontinued its programme of moving non-Muslims out of Iran. The reason is that US President Donald Trump announced during his election campaign that he would prohibit immigration from several countries to the United States. In September 2017 President Trump banned or restricted visas to travel to the United States from eight countries, the next step in what began as his travel ban from six Muslim nations, soon after taking office in January 2017.

The new presidential order retains restrictions on five of the six countries (Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria and Yemen), lifts restrictions on visitors from the Sudan and adds new restrictions on visitors and immigrants from Chad, North Korea and Venezuela. In a Sunday night proclamation, Trump blocked the issuance of all visas from North Korea

1 Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, established in 1881 in order to support Jewish immigrants. Given the decrease in the number of Jewish immigrants, the organisation started supporting the emigration of Christians. In particular, HIAS spent substantial funds to organise the emigration of Christians from Iran in the 1990s.

and Syria, while blocking nearly all visas from Iran except those intended for students and exchange visitors. The issuance of all immigrant visas and business and tourist visas was suspended from Chad, Libya and Yemen (NBC News).

Before President Trump entered office, similar refugee cases under the Lautenberg Amendment had an approval rate of close to 100 per cent. Prior to arriving in Vienna, the refugees undergo an initial screening, after which Austria issues transit visas at the request of the State Department. Once in Austria, the refugees are interviewed by US authorities (Foreign Policy).

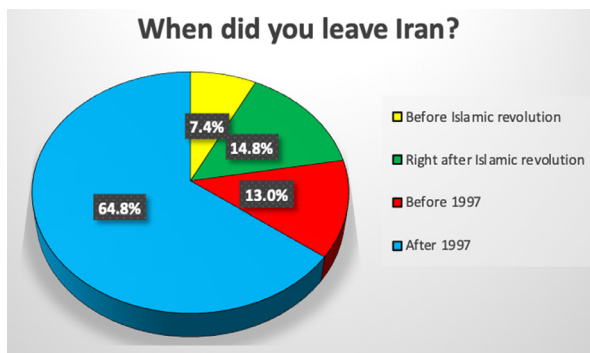
Thus, the United States changed the immigration policy, and because of this shift, hundreds of Christians from Iran, mostly Armenians, wait in Vienna in an uncertain status. They will most probably have to return to Iran, where they will not be welcomed.

A spokesperson for the State Department told Foreign Policy that the applications for resettlement had been rejected by the Department of Homeland Security but declined to provide a reason or other details. The Department of Homeland Security did not respond to requests for comment. 'These individuals were subject to the same rigorous process for resettlement as all refugees and, following input from all relevant departments and agencies, the applications for resettlement were denied' (Foreign Policy).

While Armenians in Iran manage to maintain their identity through restricting marriages with other ethnicities and preserving all the characteristics of Armenian traditional families, after moving to the United States or Europe they face this challenge in a more ambiguous situation. In Iran restrictions on marriages are relatively simple because of the Muslim environment, whereas in the United States or Europe the fact of being surrounded by Christians accelerates the assimilation process. This is not the only issue mentioned by ex-Iranian-Armenian respondents in the survey organised for the purposes of this article.

More than 100 subjects completed the questionnaire of the quantitative web-based survey implemented during March to June 2018, targeting those Iranian-Armenians that had emigrated from Iran.

Figure 1: When did you leave Iran?



Source: Author's survey and calculations.

In response to the question ‘When did you leave Iran?’ 7,4 per cent of those surveyed indicated that they had emigrated from Iran prior to the Islamic revolution; 14,8 per cent left Iran directly after the revolution; 13 per cent emigrated before 1997 (the launch of the activities of HIAS in Iran); and 64,8 per cent exited the country after 1997. These responses have both objective and subjective interpretations. Most of those that left Iran because of the Islamic revolution currently are seniors; most of them do not operate computers and do not make use of social networks. However, it is worth noting that most of the emigrants left Iran after 1997, indicating that it was as a result of the activities of HIAS.

In response to the question ‘What was the reason to leave Iran?’, most of the respondents (27,8 per cent) indicated a fear for the future in the Islamic Republic, which is confirmation of the hypothesis that during that period Christian Armenians had no idea how they would continue living in a theocratic country. Thirteen per cent of those surveyed mentioned higher education since their chosen specialisation was not developed in Iran. Interestingly, 9,3 per cent answered that the reason for migration was a pure wish to live in the west, that is, they had no anxiety about living in a state with an Islamic value system; they merely wanted to live in the west.

Naturally, each of those surveyed had to overcome certain challenges in the new host country, and in the case of 27,8 per cent these were living conditions; for 25,9 per cent cultural shock; for 16,6 per cent language skills; and 9,3 per cent had legal issues to solve.

Two-thirds of the respondents (64,8 per cent) claimed that they felt themselves completely integrated in the new host country. Incidentally, most of these responses came from those emigrants who permanently live in Armenia.

6 Conclusion

As expected, the research reveals that the Iranian-Armenian community today is relatively weakened, and the harsh socio-economic conditions often lead to emigration, in most cases the preferred destination being the United States and European countries.

Those who opt to stay in their country of birth, namely, Iran, apply several approaches for keeping their Armenian identities, namely:

- non-acceptance of mixed marriages, including those with non-Armenian Christians such as Assyrians from northern provinces of Iran; marrying a Muslim is more often disallowed by community norms;
- adherence to Iranian-Armenian cultural groups and artwork, and a disregard of Iranian cultural values; and
- cooperation with cultural and academic circles from Armenia that has the effect of ‘fresh oxygen’.

The article established that the greatest challenge for Iranian-Armenians was emigration that over the years had grown in magnitude. Unfortunately, neither the community, nor the prelacy, nor the state has strategised a mechanism to prevent this flow or to direct it towards Armenia.

The emigration of Iranian-Armenians consisted of two major waves. The first wave started directly after the Islamic revolution of 1978-1979, mainly occasioned by a fear of the new regime and uncertainty. The second wave was facilitated by the activities of the Jewish HIAS organisation that supported the emigration of non-Muslims from Iran.

A considerable number of Armenians faced serious language and cultural challenges in their new host countries. Naturally, the younger generation has overcome those issues much more seamlessly than the seniors. As many migrants and refugees worldwide, during the first period of their stay in the new country, most of the emigrants were not able to find employment according to their professions and contented themselves with whatever was available.

The research provided interesting data about another challenge that requires a specifically dedicated study, namely, issues around the Armenian schools. In reality, these are called such only because they offer one or two additional courses on Armenian studies. A significant number of interviewees stated that the graduates of those schools were not competitive with their peers in neither Iran nor Armenia. In the first case, the general courses in Farsi are being taught by mediocre teachers since the best teachers are not being directed to the Armenian schools. In the second case, students are equipped with knowledge in classical Eastern-Armenian orthography that is not readily applied in Armenia. As a result, graduates of those Armenian schools mostly fail to enter further higher educational institutions.

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