

***Identity Salience: A Probe Study of Second-Generation Iranian Americans in Southern California***

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**Introduction:**

*Whatever the explanation, none of us would disagree that, despite our many individual achievements, we do not have an effective, nationally recognized community voice in the United States” (Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans [PAAIA] Prospectus, 2008).*

Group identification and ethnic salience are often strong motivators for collective political action (Chong and Rogers 2005); however, this is not necessarily the case for every ethnic or racial group. In the case of Iranian Americans, for example, majorities of Iranian Americans identify as Iranian, Persian, or Iranian American<sup>1</sup>, and also find these identities to be salient (Daha 2010; PAAIA National Survey 2011). Yet, despite being a noticeable presence in the country for almost four decades since immigrating to the United States in mass numbers after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iranian Americans are largely absent from the American political scene. If ethnic identity is salient for Iranian Americans—and salient ethnic identities generally motivate collective political action—why then do Iranian Americans lack a collective voice?

The answer here seems obvious at first; as recent immigrants, they may face difficulties assimilating, developing English language skills, becoming financially stable, or generally becoming acculturated to American civic life. Perhaps it is these difficulties,

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<sup>1</sup> While Iranian, Persian, and Iranian American are seen as being three different types of identities (national vs. ethnic vs. hyphenated), the majority of Iranian Americans in the U.S. are largely secular-Muslims that identify as “Persian” (PAAIA). The respondents in my sample largely fit this category as well. Additionally, the respondents all used these terms relatively interchangeably when describing their identities. As such, I remain concerned with whether or not respondents name any of these three identities as being salient or dominant rather than the particular label they choose.

similar to those faced by most groups who first come to the United States, that have prevented Iranian Americans' collective political action.

Yet, it is clear that much of the story that can be told for many immigrant communities cannot be told for Iranians in the U.S. Despite being foreigners, Iranians brought with them a number of advantages—advantages that political science literature typically associates with political participation (Chong and Rogers 2005). For example, Iranians have higher than average levels of education, higher incomes, and higher rates of citizenship than other immigrant groups (Kelley et al. 1993; MIT ISG Iranian Community Survey 2005; PAAIA National Survey 2008). Many of them came with knowledge of the English language, as well as “western” liberal ideals of citizenship and culture, due to the long history of contact between Iran, the U.S., and European nations such as France and Britain (Kelley et al. 1993). Unlike other groups, however, these advantages have not led to politicization for Iranian Americans.

This project aims to begin understanding why, despite individual level accomplishments and group members' high levels of ethnic salience, second-generation Iranian Americans, in particular, have yet to become politicized on behalf of their group. As a probe study, this project acts as the first step toward fine-tuning the questions that researchers ask in regards to the Iranian American case, as well as potential factors that may be at work in either politicizing or de-politicizing individual group members. The purpose here is not to generalize, but rather, to develop a framework to understand how and why Iranian American political identities are activated. With this puzzle in mind, I focus on the following questions: *(1) Is ethnic identity salient for second-generation Iranian*

*Americans within cultural and political contexts? (2) Is the Iranian Revolution of 1979 a politicizing collective memory for second-generation Iranian Americans?*

### **Literature Review:**

#### ***Group Identification As A Determinant of Political Participation***

It is well documented in the literature that group identification is a, "...a resource for political engagement," and often determines group members' policy preferences (Chong and Rogers 2005: 45). That is to say, the ties an individual has to his or her ethnic, racial, religious and other group identities, helps explain why some group members participate in ways that benefit the group and others do not. In fact, racial and ethnic ties are considered to be so influential for some groups that they often outweigh individual characteristics, such as socioeconomic status or education. For example, Dawson (1994) finds that despite class becoming an increasingly important determinant of support for various policy decisions among blacks, race is still the most salient factor. Socioeconomic differences between lower-income and middle-class blacks then do not outweigh shared racial experiences; community members across the socioeconomic spectrum feel strongly tied to the overall black community, allowing for homogenous economic views and policy preferences (Dawson 1994). For blacks, race clearly functions as a unifying factor as a result of the group's history, members' shared experiences, and a sense of "linked fate," all of which leads to collective political preferences, and presumably, political action (Dawson 1994).

Although the African American model predicts the crucial role of racial or ethnic identification in determining policy preferences, this model cannot be transferred to every

group.<sup>2</sup> Rather, because the majority of African Americans highly value their racial identities, homogeneity can be assumed, and thus, racial identity can help predict policy preferences and likelihood for political action on behalf of the group (Brady and Kaplan 2000). Only when identities are salient for the majority, however, can political action so easily be predicted for a racial/ethnic group. This brings to light a key distinction, however: group preferences and behaviors depend more on group identity *salience* rather than *nominal* group identification—a type of variable that the majority of mainstream political science literature continues to use to explain political behavior and participation. As such, this study assumes that *ethnic salience* of individual group members is a more accurate determinant of politicization on behalf of the group rather than simple identification.

### ***Ethnic Salience Across Contexts***

Ethnic salience refers to “...the psychological prominence of ethnic identity at a given point in time...” (Yip 2005: 1603). In other words, salient identities are those that are important (or dominant) for individual members of a larger group. Identity then is not simply an ascribed nominal category. Instead, identities are graded, reflecting the differences in a members’ level of attachment to that group identity (Brady and Kaplan 2000). If attachment to the group is necessary to develop a sense of group belonging, encouraging people to participate on behalf of their group; and if these group identities can be more or less important to individual members of these groups, then ethnic salience may

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<sup>2</sup> Ethnicity and race cannot be assumed to unify all members of a group in all cases. A certain level of homogeneity in terms of ethnic salience must first be established then prior to utilizing group identities to answer questions about group participation and political behavior. Obtaining empirical evidence without considering ethnic salience can lead to inaccurate conclusions regarding group behavior (Brady and Kaplan 2000). Brady and Kaplan (2000) argue that, “cases should be empirically identified and treated as worthy of comment and explanation instead of simply taken for granted. It would thus be an empirical question in each case...” (58). That is to say, every case would require a group-specific analysis.

be the key to determining whether or not individuals choose to participate on behalf of their group.

In the Iranian American case, there is some evidence that ethnic identity<sup>3</sup> is salient. PAAIA's National Survey (2011), conducted each year since 2008<sup>4</sup>, shows that ethnic identity is either very important or somewhat important to eighty-three percent (83%) of their 400 survey respondents.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, several studies of Iranian Americans over the years have indicated similar findings. MIT's Iranian Studies Group found in their 2004 Iranian American Community Survey that approximately eighty-eight percent of their respondents<sup>6</sup> indicate that they are of "Persian" heritage, while the rest of the respondents claim either Azari (11%), Kurdish (4%), Lor (2.3%), Gilak (3.6%), or other minority ethnic identities. Additionally, the survey asks respondents how they introduce themselves; approximately forty-three percent (43%) answer "Iranian," twenty-five percent (25%) answer "Persian," and eighteen percent (18%) answer either "Iranian American" or "Persian American."<sup>7</sup> In large part then, the Iranian American community in the United States is composed of ethnic Persians that highly value their ethnic heritage.

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<sup>3</sup> Here, I understand ethnic identity in the social psychological perspective, as being "a social identity based on the culture of one's ancestors' national or tribal group(s), as modified by the demands of the culture in which one's group currently resides" (Helms 1994: 293).

<sup>4</sup> A PAAIA National Survey is missing for 2010.

<sup>5</sup> This survey asks the question, "How important is your ethnic heritage in defining your identity—very important, somewhat important, somewhat unimportant, not very important?" However, it does not allow us to know *which* ethnic identities people specifically identifying as. However, the majority of Iranians in the United States reflect a population of secular, Persian-Muslims, and thus, the sample seems to reflect this as well.

<sup>6</sup> A total of 3,687 total respondents answered this question.

<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that these surveys give Iranian American respondents discrete categories to choose from. Interestingly, as noted, in my own conversations with Iranian Americans, many of them used these terms interchangeably. While many of them did take a moment to explain that they preferred "Persian" over "Iranian" due to the negative connotations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, they quickly slipped back into discussing themselves as both "Iranian" and "Persian."

Given that the majority of Iranian Americans value ethnic identity, implying that a critical mass of individuals exists to work towards the larger community's goals, it becomes even more curious why collective political action on the part of Iranian Americans has failed to develop. Some of this may be attributed to divisions within the community, such as religious affiliations<sup>8</sup>. For those who belong to minority religions in the Iranian American community, for instance, there is some evidence that individuals have stronger attachments to these identities rather than Iranian or Persian ethnic identities<sup>9</sup> (Tehrani 2009). These theories remain insufficient, however, as a vast majority of the community are secular-Muslim Iranians or Persians who highly value ethnic identity and thus, should be able to leverage ethnic identity salience into collective action<sup>10</sup> (Tehrani 2009). Why then does ethnic salience not translate into politicization and participation on behalf of the group for Iranian Americans?

### ***Situational (Contextual) Ethnic Salience***

Although ethnic identities are often important for immigrant communities, including Iranian Americans, it is less clear whether these identities are salient in *every* situation. That is, given that identities can be more or less important to individual members

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<sup>8</sup> There does seem to be a more coordinated effort on the part of some religious minorities within the Iranian community, such as Persian Jews, towards political action. For example, Jimmy Delshad, the mayor of Beverly Hills, was of Persian Jewish background.

<sup>9</sup> Although the religious divisions within the community fall outside the scope of this study as a result of an insufficient sample of respondents who belong to minority religions within the community, I also find that respondents that belong to a minority religion did in fact find these identities to be more salient than ethnic Iranian identity, which is in line with theories that explain the lack of political voice for Iranian Americans as resulting from these types of divisions.

<sup>10</sup> Still, despite the body of literature that is being built on ethnic salience in the Iranian American community, the question of ethnic salience should be taken as an empirical question in each case (Brady and Kaplan 2000). As such, this study also asks respondents about the salience of identity, and largely supports findings from previous literatures.

of a group, it is also possible that identities become more or less important across different contexts. In other words, *ethnic identity may be situational*.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike traditional primordialist literature that views group identities as “natural” or fixed (Geertz 1973: 259), recent scholarship views identity through a constructivist perspective. This perspective acknowledges that identities can be made and remade, built and torn down; thus, identities are flexible over time and across contexts (Laitin 1998; Brady and Kaplan 2000). While it is clear that “the structure of the situation in which members of a group find themselves and the ability of leaders to enforce boundaries are important” (Brady and Kaplan 2000: 59) for determining which identity comes into play in any given situation, it is less clear the types of contexts that cause identities to shift, as well as which identities specifically become important (or unimportant) in various situations. Identities can change across situations, but more research must be done to understand how these identities become important in various situations.

For Iranian Americans, it may be that ethnic identity is salient in some contexts, such as those involving family or cultural events, but not in others (e.g. political contexts). That is to say, Iranian Americans may have *culturally salient* ethnic identities but not *politically salient*. For example, ethnic identity may become dominant in situations involving co-ethnic friends, when speaking Farsi, or when celebrating cultural events such as *Nowruz* or Persian New Year, but may be less important in a political sense. In fact, scholars including Mehdi Bozorgmehr (1997) describe how Iranian parents take pride in their cultural heritage, passing down the language and traditions to their second-

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<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that individuals in various situations cease to have intersecting identities. Rather, my interest is which identities emerge in the forefront of an Iranian Americans’ understandings of themselves within various contexts, and in particular, in contexts involving politics.

generation children within the home. Less work has explored whether this importance translates to spaces outside of the home.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Collective Memory and Ethnic Salience***

What factors lead to political activation of ethnic identities for Iranian Americans? Members of the Iranian community share many of the factors that lead to participation on behalf of the group, such as salience, education levels, generation, English language proficiency, and years in the country (Kelley et al. 1993). Despite these characteristics, Iranian Americans still do not have a visible political voice (NIAC Mission Statement; PAAIA Prospectus 2008). While various factors may contribute to the activation of politically salient identities, this study seeks to explore the relationship between collective memory and ethnic salience in political contexts.

While various authors describe collective memory and its importance to the maintenance of ethnic identity, the actual definition remains ambiguous. Milton Takei (1998) defines collective memories of ethnic groups or nations briefly as “...common experiences which cause [groups] to change through time...” (61). These are generally distant events in the group’s past, as well as recent events, that combine to create a group’s collective memory (Takei 1998: 59-60). Thus, “social memories” that are passed down through the generations, as well as those formed in current times and places, “...[prompt] the people involved to think of themselves as members of a certain collectivity” (Takei 1998: 63). That is to say, collective memories—in the broadest sense of the word—help link members of a community to one another.

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<sup>12</sup> In order to better evaluate changes in Iranian identity across situations, empirical evidence needs to be collected, so as to avoid the pitfalls of “transferring wholesale the measures” utilized in the study of situational identity from one group to another (Chong and Rogers 2005: 69).



Additionally, although collective memories are traditionally thought of as those events that affect an entire group uniformly, working to tie communities together through the *collective* recollection of these memories (e.g., the legacy of slavery for African Americans and the Holocaust for Jewish communities), collective memories may also be remembered *individually*. In fact, “ethnic groups can go through the same histories together while having different collective memories” (Takei 1998: 65). In the case of Iranian Americans, for instance, those who immigrated to the United States in the years either immediately preceding or following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, may have experienced the events related to the Revolution differently. As such, the Iranian Revolution and time of exit from the country may have created two distinct cohorts with different collective memories of these events, despite the fact that the majority of Iranian Americans today share a collective understanding of the historical events of the Revolution, as well as its effects on their ability to either remain living in Iran or to return there.

Maurice Halbwachs (1992) elaborates on this phenomenon of individually experienced collective memories. He explains how memories can manifest themselves within individuals through “...traditions of the family, of religious groups, and of social classes” (40). Thus, it may be that for some groups, collective memories begin as historical events that are collectively experienced, but are later transformed and constructed in various ways by the different people who experience these events directly. For example, a collective event, such as the Iranian Revolution, may act as the foundation through which individuals, families, and segments understand their personal experiences and ultimately, come to understand their ethnic identities. The individual experience of collective memories may then explain why certain events that are known and passed down from

generation to generation affect some members of a population more so than other. Thus, the definition of collective memory remains broad here, with both group and individual experiences being at play, as well as both past and present events. Clearly, ethnic groups can have several (and perhaps overlapping) collective memories (Takei 1998). It may be through these various historical and constructed memories, that ethnic identity takes shape and becomes important to individual members of an ethnic group.

Literature suggests that some memories may be shared by an entire group, creating a basis for unity and a shared identity; at the same time, other memories that are experienced by specific subsets of a population may ignite ethnic identity for those individuals in ways that are different from the rest of the group. For instance, while all Iranian immigrants in the United States experienced lives in Iran, not all of them experienced the Revolution directly. As such, individuals have multiple, differing, and overlapping memories that help construct Iranian American identity differently for various segments of the community.

### **Effect of Collective Memory On Ethnic Salience**

There is one common theme throughout the literature: *all* types of collective memories seem to make ethnic identity more salient for individuals (Takei 1998). That is, ethnic salience seems to link individual members to the larger ethnic or racial community. Dawson (1994) touches on this when discussing the role of black social networks and black familial ties that make racial identity more important for African Americans. He finds that blacks who have more intricately tied social networks and who have strong familial ties with other blacks outside of their socioeconomic level are more likely to have economic policy preferences that match up with the majority of the black community. Dawson (1994)

attributes this to feelings of “linked fate”—an almost affective feeling that one’s future is connected to that of one’s ethnic or racial group. He theorizes that the stronger a person’s ties are to his or her ethnic or racial community, the more likely he or she is to have policy preferences that will benefit the community. And in fact, while class is increasingly important, the strength of the salience of race remains constant and ultimately connects members of the black community to one another in a way that makes their preferences highly homogeneous.

Although Dawson (1994) alludes to why African Americans feel connected to one another (“linked fate”), there is less of a discussion of *how* or *why* this connectedness develops. The missing variable here may be the passing down of collective memories that work to create or augment the sense of linked fate (Dawson 1994). And in fact, some studies *have* concluded that the passing down of collective memories creates a sense that group members are, in some way, shape, or form, linked to one another in a way that differentiates them from other groups (Halbwachs 1992; Takei 1998). For African Americans, these memories may take the shape of black slavery, post-Civil War economic oppression, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights movement (Dawson 1994). It may be that “the social component...” of passing down memory “has reinforced the racial identity of African Americans through the strengthening of the perceived link between one’s own fate and the fate of the race.

Additionally, collective memories can take different forms, affecting certain segments of a group differently than others (Takei 1998). As such, it is possible that collective memories can ignite ethnic identity differently in various situations. While some collective memories may make ethnic identity important to individuals in some situations,

this may not be true for all situations. In other words, different collective memories may affect ethnic identity differently across contexts. In the case of Iranian Americans, who have both memories of lives in Iran as well as memories of inherently political events, such as the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Iranian ethnic identity may become more or less important in various situations depending on the nature of the collective memories for individuals.

Nonetheless if collective memories can lead to linked fate, they may also encourage the politicization of ethnic identities. Perhaps, the greater "...the perceived link between one's own fate and that of the race, the more politically salient becomes racial identity..." (Dawson 1994: 61). Still, how collective memory relates to identity salience, or the types of memories that are necessary to create ethnic identities that are important in political contexts, is relatively unexplored, and thus, remains an interesting empirical question to be addressed.

## **Methods**

For this probe study, I used snowball sampling to recruit first-, 1.5, and second-generation Iranian Americans living in southern California (mainly the greater Los Angeles area, as well as Orange and San Diego Counties). I asked friends and family of Iranian descent to suggest the names of group members that would be willing to participate. Although, twenty-five contacts were made initially through email, only five second-generation individuals responded. I also asked each second-generation member to ask one parent (either mother or father) to participate. Although my study seeks to understand the experiences of second-generation members, interviewing a parent allows me to place the second-generation respondents' experiences with collective memories of the Revolution in context. As such, I gained a better sense of how collective memories are transmitted and

reinforced, and thus, a better understanding of the potential of collective memories to politicize ethnic groups. In the end, eight individuals volunteered to participate in the first round of interviews, which I conducted during the spring of 2012. I also conducted two additional interviews with second-generation individuals in February and March 2013, for a total of ten interviews.

The main reason for utilizing a snowball sampling method is the difficulty in locating Iranian American respondents. Because the Census officially categorizes Iranian Americans as “white,” this population is difficult to locate through random sampling (Tehrani 2009). Additionally, although the sample size is small, this study is not meant to make broad generalizations about Iranian Americans in the United States (or even southern California alone). Rather, this study acts as a small step toward a much larger project on Iranian American identity; here, I seek to explore potential questions regarding the situational nature of Iranian ethnic identity, as well as the role of collective memory in affecting ethnic salience across various contexts.

Respondents were asked to take part in individual thirty to forty-five minute semi-structured interviews, either in-person in their home or using their computer’s Skype or FaceTime applications. For ease of communication and later analysis, all interviews were tape-recorded. After each interview, I spent some time summarizing the interview and writing down my general impressions of the respondents’ answers. I also transcribed each interview using open-coding methods in order to allow themes and patterns to emerge from the interviews themselves. A full interview schedule is included in Appendix A.

## **Results**

The ten respondent sample breaks down as follows: six women and four men; six second-generation members, one 1.5 generation member, and three first-generation members. The three first-generation members are all parents of one of the second-generation members. Again, while this study focuses on ethnic salience of the second-generation, interviews with the first-generation members are used to place the narratives of the second-generation into context, particularly in regards to the influence of collective memories on ethnic salience.

All of the respondents are highly educated; all second-generation and 1.5 generation respondents have either completed their bachelor's degrees or are in the process of completing these degrees. Four respondents are also planning on pursuing a graduate degree. Half of the second-generation respondents are fully employed. It seems then that second-generation members have educational predispositions for political participation.

All of the first-generation respondents came to the United States between 1978 and 1988<sup>13</sup>, the years immediately preceding the 1979 Iranian Revolution up through the Iran-Iraq War, which lasted from 1980-1988. Again, the years immediately preceding and, in particular, following the Revolution, were characterized by a huge influx of Iranian political refugees<sup>14</sup>. Of my sample, two first-generation female respondents, Nasrin and Mona, emigrated from Iran for educational reasons, and neither were in Iran during the time of the Revolution (although, both returned briefly after the Revolution). Only one first-generation male respondent, Payam, lived in Iran through the entire length of the Revolution. While all three first-generation members either had experiences with events

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<sup>13</sup> One 1.5-generation participant came to the U.S. with her family in 1988, while the last first-generation participant came in

<sup>14</sup> It is unclear whether all Iranian immigrants that came during this period identify as such, especially as Iranian individuals must apply for refugee status upon entering countries abroad.

leading up to the Revolution or visited the country briefly after the Revolution, all of them decided to leave and permanently relocate in the United States due to the political situation in Iran.

### ***Ethnic Salience***

In line with the literature on ethnic salience, all of the first- and second-generation respondents show high levels of ethnic salience. That is, when asked to identify which identities are most important to them, the majority of respondents name either Iranian American, Persian, or Iranian identity as being most important to them<sup>15</sup>. The only exception here are the two respondents who belong to a religious minority group (Zoroastrian), and who indicate that religious identity is more important than any ethnic identity. Even in these cases, however, ethnic identity is salient to an extent. For example, Mona, a fifty-five year old dentist and mother of three, indicates that while Zoroastrian identity is the most important for her, being “Iranian American” and “Persian” are important as well<sup>16</sup> (Mona). However, unlike the secular-Muslim respondents, the Zoroastrian respondents find their ethnic identities to be important alongside other identities, such as gender. Both Mona and her daughter, Sanaz, list Zoroastrian as being the most important identity, with their ethnic identities being as important as either their gender category or another identity category (e.g. “American” for Sanaz, a second-generation Persian Zoroastrian).

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<sup>15</sup> See Appendix A., Question 12. *I am going to give you a list of various identity categories. These are listed in alphabetical order. You have 10 points to allocate among these categories depending on how strongly you relate to each category. You may allocate your points in whatever way you like.*

<sup>16</sup> Mona\* allocated four points to “Zoroastrian,” two points to “Persian,” two points to Iranian American, and two points to “woman.”

For the second-generation, ethnic identity also came into play when asking respondents the question, “*Who am I?*” The majority of second-generation respondents stated at some point in their answers that they are “Persian,” “Iranian,” or “Iranian American.” For example, Ava, a twenty-four year old female and second-generation member, describes herself as a “...Persian girl that lives in L.A. and that grew up in the OC” (Ava). Similarly, Kamran, a twenty-seven year old fire-fighter in Los Angeles explains that he is a “...friend, brother, son, [an] Iranian American [who is] very proud of [his] heritage...” (Kamran). Arash, a twenty-three year old college graduate who wishes to pursue his medical degree, also states that he thinks of himself as “...an athlete, a doctor, an Iranian, and an American” (Arash). Thus, even for the second-generation, ethnic identity is an important aspect of their overall identities and works to characterize how second-generation Iranian Americans think of themselves as individuals.

### ***Ethnic Salience Across Contexts***

Respondents were also asked which identities they felt themselves to be in various contexts.<sup>17</sup> While these questions do not test the degree of ethnic identity salience in various contexts, they do illustrate which identities group members feel are *dominant* or *important* to them within these various contexts. These contexts include those defined by: the family, friends, school or work, and politics.<sup>18</sup>

While ethnic identities are salient for all of the second-generation respondents, there is evidence that ethnic identity is not necessarily salient across *all* contexts. In fact, ethnic identity is salient for the majority of second-generation Iranian Americans in

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<sup>17</sup> For example, question (13) states: “When you are with your friends? Which identity do you feel yourself to be?”

<sup>18</sup> See Appendix A. for full questionnaire.



contexts involving the family or friends, often regardless of whether those friends are co-ethnics or not. However, ethnic “Iranian,” “Persian” or “Iranian American” identity is not necessarily salient in political contexts. As such, there seems to be a clear distinction between two types of ethnic identity salience: first, *culturally salient ethnic identities* (i.e., ethnic salience in contexts involving family, friends, or school/work) and second, *politically salient ethnic identities* (i.e., ethnic salience in contexts involving political activity broadly).

Much of this distinction between culturally salient and politically salient ethnic identities seems to depend on whether or not second-generation members have collective memories of the 1979 Iranian Revolution that have been passed down to them from their parents. In large part, this depends on whether or not first-generation parents were present in the country during the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Those who have parents that left either right before, or were only present briefly at periods during or after the Revolution, are much less likely to have knowledge of their parents’ stories of these events, although they may have some factual knowledge of the events themselves. Again, for the most part, first-generation members immigrated to the United States as a result of the revolution (or decided to stay in the U.S. once it started and they were already in the middle of pursuing their studies here in the United States). However, not every parent had enough direct experience to inspire them to discuss these experiences with their children. As such, many of the second-generation members lack a sense of how these events affected the lives of those close to them. Lacking the collective memory of these experiences thus makes it much less likely that ethnic Iranian identity will be salient for these individuals in political situations, as these second-generation individuals will not have a sense of the difficulty and traumas that the harsh political situations created for their parents.

At the same time, the majority of the second-generation respondents seem to have collective memories of their parents' lives in Iran, regardless of whether or not these are "political" memories related to the Revolution. The well-established link between collective memories and ethnic salience (Takei 1998) suggests that these memories of an Iran that once, as well as stories of the greatness of the Persian empire, its kings, and its glory days, help to create and reinforce culturally salient ethnic identities for second-generation Iranian Americans. And in fact, the majority of second-generation members in my sample have culturally salient ethnic identity—that is, the majority of second-generation respondents state that ethnic identity is salient in contexts involving family, friends, and school/work. For all second-generation respondents, these culturally salient identities seem to be correlated with the presence of family narratives of a "mythical Iran" that their parents experienced.

However, having a culturally salient Iranian identity by itself does not ensure that ethnic identity will become activated within political contexts. Rather, evidence suggests that collective memories of the Revolution passed down from first-generation parents, help to ignite ethnic "Iranian," "Persian" or "Iranian American" identity in contexts related to politics.

As a result of this analysis, I may begin creating a typology that distinguishes between culturally salient ethnic identities and politically salient ethnic identities of the second-generation, with collective memories and narratives of a "mythical Iran" and of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 as contributing factors that lead to the activation of ethnic identity across cultural and political contexts.

### ***Culturally Salient Identities and the Narratives of a "Mythical Iran"***

For second-generation Iranian Americans, culturally salient identities may be activated as a result of narratives and collective memories of past lives in Iran, hereafter referred to as “mythical Iran” memories. These narratives involve more general memories of an Iran that once was, prior to Iran’s transformation into the Islamic Republic of Iran after 1979. Inspiration for this characterization of “mythical Iran” collective memories or narratives comes from Zohreh Sullivan (2001), who describes an imagined community<sup>19</sup> of exiles and their children, whose identities are shaped by “narrative myths” that “...[construct] an imagined unity...” (8). Much like other Iranian children whose parents fled their homes for sociopolitical reasons, Sullivan (2001) describes thinking that “...happiness meant a return to an imaginary country—Iran—where life was always rich with loving relatives and saffron-scented rice” (8). These stories in large part characterize a past that has been re-constructed by the first-generation as they look back on their former lives in Iran. Part fantasy and part reality, these memories involve stories about their parents’ daily lives growing up in a “free” and prosperous Iran (Sullivan 2001).

For the majority of second-generation respondents then, ethnic salience seems to be influenced by these memories of “mythical Iran”—that is, the majority of second-generation respondents in my sample who discuss “mythical Iran” narratives also have culturally salient ethnic identities. For instance, Sanaz, a second-generation Zoroastrian respondent describes how her parents never really discussed the revolution growing up, but rather focused on stories of “home life” (Sanaz). Because her parents were not in the country during the Revolution, they did not have direct experiences to share with her. Instead, her mother discussed her life growing up on a farm; both parents “...never really

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<sup>19</sup> Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso.

talked about any bad times, it was always family life and what they did; how their everyday lives went, how school was, and things like that..." (Sanaz).

Similarly, Parisa, a nineteen-year-old college student whose parents were not present for the revolution, was also told stories of her parents' lives in Iran; however, she rarely discussed the revolution with her parents. In fact, Parisa did not know much about the revolution at all, becoming confused at one point between how the majority of Iranian Americans generally view the former Shah of Iran as opposed to the Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic factions during the revolution and the first Ayatollah of the Islamic Republic. She asked shyly, "Khomeini....he was the good guy right?" Parisa, who identifies as a secular-Muslim, states that her parents did not go back to Iran after coming to the United States to attend university because of the revolution. Thus, the revolution did affect their lives in some ways. However, because they did not experience the revolution directly, her parents did not share these collective memories with her. Her memories were characterized more by her parents' day-to-day lives rather than their experiences with politics. As a result, Parisa had ethnic salience in cultural contexts, but not in political contexts. Her mom's stories of daily life in Iran prior to coming to the United States for college made her interested in her heritage. As a college student she is a member of her campus' Iranian Student Union, listens to Persian music, and participates in local cultural events. For Parisa, ethnic identity is culturally relevant, but not politically relevant.

Kamran also lacks these collective memories of the Iranian Revolution, although he is up-to-date and knowledgeable about its political history. However, his parents did not directly experience the traumas of the revolution, meaning that most of their stories have to do with their daily lives in Iran ("mythical Iran" memories). Kamran's mother, Nasrin,

did briefly return to the country after the revolution for a few months; as such, Kamran describes his mother saying negative things about Khomeini growing up. However, these stories did not include her personal experiences with the revolution. Thus, Kamran does not have a strong sense of the collective memory of the 1979 Iranian Revolution that might ignite a politicized ethnic identity. As expected, because he lacks these revolution stories, Kamran "...[does not] see [himself] as Iranian at all..." when it comes to politics (Kamran). When he does discuss politics, he identifies strictly as "American" (Kamran). Interestingly however, Kamran goes on to explain that "...being Iranian has allowed [him] to have a more empathetic and understanding view of those [Middle Eastern] countries... even in foreign policy, I take an American standpoint...but being Iranian American has allowed [him] to have view points that the average American doesn't have" (Kamran). Thus, while the lack of collective memories of the Iranian Revolution has inhibited the development of a politically salient ethnic identity for Kamran, the fact that he is empathetic toward Middle Eastern countries when thinking about issues of foreign policy means that second-generation members that lack Revolution memories may have the potential for developing politicized ethnic identities in the future. However, the alternate conditions under which this may occur are presently outside the scope of this paper. At present, it is clear that Kamran, much like the majority of my second-generation respondents, thinks of his Iranian ethnic identity as being a "cultural [thing]...it's how you embrace it" (Kamran).

Thus, for Kamran and many other second-generation members who are caught in between American and Iranian identities, ethnic identity tends to be only important in cultural contexts. Respondents with culturally salient ethnic identities also tend to have collective memories or narratives of a "mythical Iran"—family stories of their parents' lives

growing up in Iran. These memories are not political in nature, and thus, do not seem to ignite ethnic identity within political contexts. “Mythical Iran” memories help to create (or perhaps reinforce) ethnic identities that are important in strictly cultural contexts.

***Politically Salient Identities and the Collective Memory of the 1979 Iranian Revolution***

*“I was particularly struck by these children [children of exiles and expatriates], who, for the most part, have no memory of Iran but nonetheless seem to have a fairly clear idea of something essential and different that has been lost and of a nebulous something that must be preserved, that must not simply melt into the generic melting pot of homogenous Americanness” (Sullivan 2001: 12).*

What then makes for a salient political identity? As hypothesized, patterns in the respondents’ answers reveal the possibility that those with strong collective memories of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 think of themselves as “Persian,” or “Iranian American” in political contexts. In other words, *individuals who have collective memories of the 1979 Iranian Revolution are more likely to have politically salient ethnic identities.*

Again, “Iranian” or “Persian” heritage, particularly in family situations, is salient for the majority of second-generation respondents. Kamran describes himself as an “American kid of Iranian heritage,” (Kamran), while Arash indicates that he is “...very openly Iranian with [his] family...” (Arash). On the other hand, Sanaz, the second-generation Zoroastrian respondent, says she would only describe herself as Persian with her family “if [she] [has] to pick” (Sanaz). Rather, Sanaz thinks of herself in non-ethnic/national identity terms—“as a daughter or a sister, and as an independent woman” (Sanaz). This may be the result of being a member of a minority religion—although, the complexities of this question are left for future research. At the moment, what is most interesting is that both Kamran and Sanaz

indicate that their parents did not share personal stories of the Iranian Revolution with them, as neither of their parents were in the country for the length of the Revolution. Yet, both respondents have heard stories of their parents' lives in Iran ("mythical Iran" memories). Again, this lends support to the idea that while stories and individual memories of lives in Iran may lead to the development of salient *cultural* identities across contexts involving the family, friends, etc., it does not necessarily make ethnic identity salient in *political contexts*. A more explicitly political collective memory, such as that of the Iranian Revolution, may then be necessary to make ethnic identity salient in political contexts.

In fact, of the second-generation respondents, only two respondents (Ava and Arash), discussed in-depth personal stories of their parents' experiences with the Revolution. These two respondents were also the only two whose parents remained in Iran throughout the length of the Iranian Revolution. Interestingly, these respondents seemed the most passionate and expressive regarding the importance of Iranian ethnic identity to their self-conceptions. For example, Ava describes how revolution memories were discussed "very freely and all the time" in her household:

"My parents moved here...the first year of the Iran/Iraq war. So, past the revolution...they got married during the revolution. So I mean they have plenty of stories...of like...ya know...making sure that their wedding date didn't fall ...in some [dangerous] area, or things like that. It was always just being careful of things" (Ava).

These stories, as well as those of her parents lives during the Iran/Iraq war, have helped shape Ava's conception of identity. She discusses that "...knowing how much [her] parents have gone through, to just raise [her] in a healthy, safe environment..." makes Iranian ethnic identity important for her. Ava clearly finds ethnic identity important in cultural

situations; however, in line with our understanding of the influence of collective memories of the revolution, Ava has ethnic salience in political contexts as well.

Ava's parents shared various anecdotes with her growing up, including those that Ava characterizes as "scary" or that evoke a "sense of sadness." She states that: "...at times, and still to this day, when they [her parents] talk about the revolution or the war, its...there's a sense of sadness behind it too because I know that my parents left behind so much, and that they risked a lot just living there...and then, to bring my brother over to just give him a better life and give him more opportunities..." (Ava). She also recalls another story about her parents flying into the airport in Iran during a blackout. It is "...experiences like that," which her parents talk about so "nonchalantly and matter-of-factly," that really help shape her identity and perhaps, make ethnic identity important for her across various contexts. She describes these stories as being "...jarring because [she's] never been through something like that and hopefully never will be" (Ava).

Again, given her parents' stories, Ava also finds Iranian American identity to be important for her in political contexts:

"...I feel so Iranian American....it probably has to do with...what my parents experienced being under the regime...and now, my own understanding of politics of how the government functions...I think it's all those things melding together that gives me that perception" (Ava).

Here, Ava clearly links her parents' lived experiences and subsequent constructed narratives of the revolution, with the fact that she finds Iranian American ethnic identity to be important for her when discussing politics or thinking about which candidate to vote for in an election.



In much the same way, ethnic identity has also come to be salient for Arash in political contexts. He describes how his mother, who moved to the United States four years after the revolution, discussed her personal experiences with him growing up:

“ [She discussed the revolution] all the time. We still talk about it a lot. She's very adamant about how much of a [big thing] the revolution was...she was 16 years old... [she said] *marg bar Shah* [death to the shah] and all that. But now she says she wishes she appreciated the Shah more. She also was in the streets protesting against *hejab* when that first happened; she got beaten. There were rumors in her high school that she was part of *Tudeh* [the Iranian Communist Party]...some classmates apparently ratted her out. And at that point, like about a year into the revolution, when they took out the prime minister, I forget what his name is...but she told me that they came after her in school and her principal told her to go home before the guards came. They took about a hundred students in a few days...and they never heard from them again. She has a lot of stories about it...that's pretty much the only reason she came out of Iran...she couldn't stand living there anymore” (Arash).

Arash is “fascinated” by his mother’s stories of politics in Iran during the Revolution (Arash). He indicates that “unlike [his] friends...[he] cares to know where he comes from” (Arash). These collective memories of the revolution and his mother’s experiences seem to connect Arash to his Iranian ethnic identity in a way that is unique in comparison to his friends who have not necessarily shared in these collective memories. And in fact, according to Arash, his friends consider him the most “Iranian” or “Persian” and he, “[doesn't] really disagree with them” (Arash).

In addition to being “openly Iranian” with friends and family, Arash finds Iranian ethnic identity to be important in political contexts—although it seems to remain important alongside his American identity. At one point, Arash makes a distinction

between foreign affairs and American politics; while he votes based on what he thinks is best for America when thinking about American politics and voting for presidential candidates, he indicates that he always "...keeps Iran's interests in mind..." (Arash). Throughout the interview, Arash seems conflicted. For example, when discussing how Arash thinks of himself in political contexts, he begins by saying that he thinks of himself as "American," especially when it comes to determining his political preferences and vote choices. Within minutes, however, he backtracks by saying that he "doesn't know" how to answer (Arash). Rather, the identity that is most important to him in political contexts "...changes based on what [he] [reads] in the news..." (Arash). On some issues Iranian identity becomes most important; on others, American identity becomes dominant. However, he finds this answer to be a complicated one: "I don't know...I want what's best for America and I want what's best for Iran...the notion that I'm more associated with one versus the other is kinda hard for me to decide" (Arash).

Arash's internal conflict illustrates how Iranian identity can be salient alongside other identities within various contexts. Because identities overlap, the importance of both Iranian and American identities to Arash does not make his answers inconsistent. Nor are his answers inconsistent with the development of our understanding of how collective memories contribute to politicization. Rather, it is clear that the collective memories of the Iranian Revolution, as well as Arash's current experiences as an Iranian American living in the United States, work together to make Iranian ethnic identity important in political contexts. In fact, Takei (1998) explains that identities can coexist in such a way, and collective memories can be constructed as a result of both past and present events. As such, while American identity may become important to second-generation Iranian Americans

within political contexts as a result of their current lived experiences as citizens of the United States, it is still the passing down of Revolution narratives from the past that have that can lead to the activation of Iranian ethnic identity within political contexts.

### **Conclusion**

After 9/11, Iranian Americans have faced various problems in the United States, including discrimination and prejudice (Tehrani 2009). Continued hostilities with Iran over their nuclear program have also placed Iran on America's "watch list." Negative impressions of Iran have thus proliferated in the news as well as in popular culture images; Iranians are often deemed as "evil," "sinister," and generally "foreign" (Tehrani 2009). And this past year as *Argo* won the Oscar for Best Picture, many Iranian Americans grew concerned that the film's portrayal of the hostage crisis will shape a negative image of Iranian Americans for a new generation of Americans who have never been exposed to it. Yet, despite these various issues of concern, Iranian Americans have not come together to form a collective community voice to address these problems.

It is clear that collective action on the part of the group may be prevented because of the lack of politicized ethnic identities among individual members of the Iranian American population. That is to say, while it is clear that Iranian Americans, even within the second-generation, have culturally salient ethnic identities, not every individual has a politically salient Iranian ethnic identity. Thus, for most of the second-generation, Iranian identity only becomes important in contexts involving their families, friends, and school or the workplace. Perhaps hanging out with co-ethnic friends, eating Persian food, listening to Iranian music, celebrating holidays, and other social interactions allow for Iranian ethnic identity to become important. These cultural identities, which are fostered and reinforced

through the retelling of memories having to do with their parents' lives in Iran (“mythical Iran” memories), may help cultivate an Iranian ethnic identity that is important in a cultural way.

However, simply having a culturally salient ethnic identity does not mean members of the second-generation will also have a politically salient ethnic identity. Rather, politically salient identities may be cultivated through collective memories of a more political nature—namely, those stories and experiences having to do with the Iranian Revolution. Knowing the traumas their parents went through during this political upheaval may ignite Iranian identity within political contexts for second-generation members, potentially leading them to address issues that are relevant to the larger Iranian American community and engage in political activity on behalf of their group. Just as collective memories can tie individual members to the larger group, these politically constituted narratives of the Revolution may activate Iranian ethnic identity in political contexts.

While this probe study does not claim to identify any causal relationships or even identify systematic patterns, the findings of this paper highlight new questions about what makes Iranian ethnic identity salient for community members and the ways in which these identities can become politicized. Future research should consider more rigorously how collective memory links to the development of culturally salient ethnic identities and politically salient ethnic identities, and how these identities relate to political action.

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## Appendix A. Interview Schedule

Researcher: Before we get started, I'd like to learn a little bit about you.

Demographic/background information:

- 1) What year were you born?
- 2) Where were you born (city, country)?
- 3) What is the highest degree you have completed? In which country?
- 4) [For second generation & first generation men]: A) Do you have an occupation?  
B) [For first generation women]: Did you choose to stay at home and raise a family or did you choose to work outside of the home?
- 5) [For first generation]: How many children do you have?

In-depth questions:

- 6) [If born outside of U.S.]: What year did you leave Iran?  
A) Did you come straight to the U.S. or did you stop anywhere along the way? [If yes]: Where did you stop/stay and how long were you there for? What year did you come to the U.S.?  
B) Who made the decision to emigrate from Iran?  
[If subject decided]: What were your reasons for immigrating?  
[If someone else decided]: What were their reasons for immigrating? Did you agree? Why did you immigrate if you disagreed?
- 7) [For first generation]: People who immigrate to the United States have many different experiences. I'm interested in how you perceived your reception in the United States.  
A) What community or neighborhood did you move into when you arrive in the United States?  
B) How did you feel you were received in this community or neighborhood? That is, how do you feel neighbors and other community members treated you?  
C) What were your interactions like with community or government officials? For example, how did the people assisting you through the immigration process treat you?  
D) Did you ever sense discrimination or feel discriminated against, personally?
- 8) [For first generation]: Were you in Iran during the years immediately leading up to the revolution?  
A) Did you stay in Iran during the revolution?  
B) [If yes]: What were your experiences during the revolution?  
B1: What were your feelings about the revolution?
- 9) [For first generation]: You have already told me that you have \_\_\_\_ number of children. I have a few questions about them.  
A) Was (Were) your son(s)/daughter(s) born in the United States?  
B) What year were they born?  
C) Did you discuss your experiences during the revolution with your children?  
D) [If yes]: What did you tell them? How much of your experiences did you share?  
D1: What did you keep to yourself and why?  
D2: Was it important for you to pass on these memories?  
E) [If no]: What were your reasons for not discussing these events with your children?



10) [For second generation]: Did your parents discuss their experiences of the revolution with you when you were a teenager?

A) If so, what did they tell you?

B) What was your reaction?

C) How do you feel these memories have affected you and your conceptions of identity, if at all?

D) Were these memories important for you to hear, why or why not?

11) I am going to give you a list of various identity categories. These are listed in alphabetical order. You have 10 points to allocate among these categories depending on how strongly you relate to each category. You may allocate your points in whatever way you like.

American \_\_\_\_

Armenian \_\_\_\_

Assyrian \_\_\_\_

Baha'i \_\_\_\_

Christian \_\_\_\_

Iranian \_\_\_\_

Iranian American \_\_\_\_

Jewish \_\_\_\_

Kurdish \_\_\_\_

Man \_\_\_\_

Middle Eastern \_\_\_\_

Muslim \_\_\_\_

Persian \_\_\_\_

Turkmen \_\_\_\_

Woman \_\_\_\_

Zoroastrian \_\_\_\_

Others that you'd like to add?

12) I'm interested in identity. How would you respond to the question, "Who am I?"

13) When you are with your friends? Which identity do you feel yourself to be?

14) How about when you are at school or at the workplace?

15) What about with your family?

16) What about when you are discussing politics with friends, determining which candidate to vote for in an upcoming election, generally participating in politics, etc.?