

IRANIAN DIASPORA ORGANIZATIONS IN PEACE BUILDING

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

National Iranian American Council.....	NIAC
Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans	PAAIA
Peace Research Institute Oslo	PRIO
United Nations.....	UN
American Israel Public Affairs Committee	AIPAC
Office of Foreign Assets Control	OFAC
Non-Governmental Organization.....	NGO
Iranian Alliances Across Borders.....	IAAB
Iranians Count 2010 Census Coalition.....	ICCC

ABSTRACT

IRANIAN DIASPORA ORGANIZATIONS IN PEACE BUILDING

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This thesis describes Iranian American diaspora organizations and their role in peace building and in acting as a bridge between their two historically conflicting countries.

This thesis will look at the various diaspora communities and their engagement during a conflict that involves their homeland. Additionally, elements that define a diaspora organization's ability to engage constructively in peace-building efforts will be presented.

A case study of one of the largest and most active Iranian American diaspora organizations, National Iranian American Council (NIAC), will be conducted. NIAC's aims and efforts will be analyzed in order to gain an understanding of the organizations strengths, potentials and limitations in peace-building between Iran and the United States.

The continuously stalemated U.S.-Iran conflict is in dire need of a new approach. Thus, looking at other potential influencers, such as the diaspora, may be paramount in reaching peace between these two nations.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, the historic tensions between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States have continued to heighten significantly. The politically charged history between these two nations has included: the role of Western powers to establish Pahlavi dynasty (1925 – 1979); a staged uprising to re-install the Shah after Mosaddegh's election (1953); the relationship between the Shah and the West and the creation of the Oil Cartel (1973); Khomeini and the hostage crisis (1979-1980); Iran's support of Hezbollah and its role in the region (1980 - present day); and the current debate over Iran's nuclear ambitions. This history has led to continuous suspicion and misunderstandings between these two nations. Within the prevailing atmosphere of mistrust, all efforts to establish a reliable line of communication between these two governments have failed.

America's recent efforts to impose globally supported sanctions against the Islamic Republic have created significant economic tensions in Iran. This pressure is intended to generate the possibility of fruitful negotiations in regards to Iran's nuclear ambitions. However, thus far, it has only facilitated further animosity and distrust between the two countries. The historic mistrust and complexity of the conditions, may justify a role for the Iranian diaspora to bring about some clarity and a more sensible strategy in resolving the existing impasse in this conflict. While top-level leaders

continue to reach stalemates, it can be beneficial to understand the influence of grassroots leaders in reaching a place of peace and understanding.

Diasporas have become a growing area of study in the conflict analysis and resolution field. While there is continuous debate over the power of their influence, the diaspora is increasingly thought of as important, and often overlooked. Diasporas are often comprised of individuals whom share dual national identities. These individuals often have transnational understandings and can play a lead role in being translators between conflicting ideologies, nationalities and practices. This level of understanding may also bring a higher degree of objective observation necessary to bridge the gaps.

The current hostile relationship between the U.S. and Iran is unsustainable, and the current approach to amending it has proven to be unsuccessful. It is vital to explore other possibilities of engagement. By examining the possibilities alive in engaging Iranian-American diaspora organizations, we are opening to new opportunities and the potential to find solace from this historic conflict.

Research Topic

The Iranian American diaspora has grown substantially; according to some estimates, it is now over a million people located throughout the United States. In recent years, there has been a noticeable growth in initiatives establishing many different organizations representing and bringing together the Iranian American community. This growth of Iranian civic engagement within American democratic society has improved the potential of this community's influence in both nations.

This study will aim at understanding the potentials and strengths of Iranian American diaspora organizations in being peace-builders. In addition to understanding the strengths and potentials, the limitations and areas of improvement will similarly be explored. In order to conduct this research, we will be using a case study of one of the more prominent and highly politically engaged diaspora organizations, the National Iranian American Council (NIAC).

A literature review will provide essential information in understanding the various roles ‘diasporas’ can hold in conflict resolution. Additionally, through a review of the literature, some criterion containing elements to determine the effectiveness and possibility of constructive diaspora engagement will be introduced. Through the use of this previously developed criterion, NIAC will be analyzed to understand the organization’s strengths in conflict resolution and its limitations.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this research paper has been explicitly stated as understanding the potentials, strengths and limitations of Iranian American diaspora organizations in being a peace-builder and bridge between the United States and Iran. This will be done through an in-depth case study analysis of NIAC, one of the largest and most politically engaged Iranian American grassroots diaspora organizations. Prior to the analysis of NIAC, a very comprehensive literature review will be provided.

Chapter 2 of this paper will provide an overview of the literature concerning Iranian American identity. This will include a summary of various scholarly definitions of both identity and culture. The chapter will continue to further delve into the

constructions of the Iranian American identity. The three main migration phases from Iran to the United States will be introduced and explained. Additionally, this chapter will explore the assimilation process of Iranians in the United States. Understanding the current composition of the Iranian American diaspora, as well as their process of getting to where they presently are, is significant in comprehending their potential ability to influence.

Chapter 3 will consist of an exploration of the relevant literature pertaining to the construct of diaspora. An exploration of various scholarly definitions of diaspora will be shared and compared. Additionally, an overview of the frequently-used terms of homeland and host land will be covered. A review of the literature regarding a specific type of diaspora, conflict-generated diaspora, will also be investigated. A majority of the Iranian American diaspora does fall under the category of conflict-generated diaspora, thus it is relevant to be aware of the current understandings of the dynamics concerning this specific type of diaspora. This chapter will provide us with several operational definitions that will be used throughout the thesis.

Chapter 4 will present a review of the literature regarding the role of diasporas in conflict. An examination will be made of how diasporas have traditionally been perceived in regards to conflict resolution and conflict, and the ways in which the perception of their role is continually changing. Two principle ways diasporas have been engaged in conflict has been through the construction of ethnic lobbies, as well as through the transferal of remittance. Both of these engagement methods, as well as others, will be explored in this chapter. Additionally, literature pertaining to the

relationship between diasporas and their homeland will be presented. The chapter will conclude by introducing a principle criterion that can be used to gauge the potentials and possibility of a diaspora organization's ability to engage constructively in peace-building and conflict resolution efforts. This criterion will be central in our analysis of NIAC.

Chapter 5 will contain the analysis of the selected diaspora organization, NIAC. This chapter will explore the efforts and development of NIAC. NIAC will primarily be analyzed in comparison to the criterion provided through the literature review. This comprehensive criterion will facilitate illuminating the multifaceted work of this diaspora organization. This chapter will expose the organization's strengths, potentials and limitations.

Chapter 6 will be the conclusion of this research paper. This chapter will highlight the important finding of this research. Additionally, incidences where the findings do not reflect the literature review will be further explored. Recommendations for further strengthening this diaspora organization to facilitate their purpose of acting as a peace-builder will be presented. Furthermore, the limitations of this study will be outlined in this concluding chapter. This research paper will conclude by providing suggested areas that could benefit from further research and examination.

Importance

The tension between Iran and the United States has amplified in recent years. The various manifestations of the conflict between these two nations have been the focus of the media, other nations, and the citizens of Iran and America for several decades. The most current manifestation of this historic conflict has been in regards to Iran's nuclear

ambitions. Both nations continue to act stubbornly and aggressively and have unfortunately ignored momentary opportunities for reconciliation. Finding ways to ease these tensions and resolve this historically-charged conflict is of utmost importance.

The Iranian American diaspora may be able to play a key role in this process, and understanding their role is paramount. Numerous scholars have claimed that hybrid-identity individuals have a pivotal role to act as bridges between their two conflicting identities and communities. This research has had the benefit of these scholarly understandings in seeking to identify a role and potential of Iranian Diaspora.

Hopefully, through this research, the potentials in engaging the Iranian American diaspora for peace-efforts will be demonstrated. Additionally, this research will support the further strengthening of the criterion used to gauge any particular diaspora organizations' potential in peace efforts. The specific case study of NIAC will provide useful information in understanding their particular role and effort in acting as a bridge between these two communities. Furthermore, this case study will shed light on the role of the most active Iranian American diaspora organization on Capitol Hill. Hopefully, through this understanding a greater appreciation for the role and influence of various organizations, including NIAC, will develop among the active leaders pursuing conflict resolution between these two countries.

There is a dire need for a new approach to mend U.S.-Iran relations. Thus, it is very important, and may be highly beneficial, to investigate all potential actors and opportunities involving U.S.-Iran affairs. Perhaps by further opening this diaspora engagement door, we are getting a few steps closer to reconciliation and peace.

CHAPTER TWO: IRANIAN AMERICAN DIASPORA

Iranian American Identity

Prior to exploring the elements that make up Iranian American identity, it is important to have an understanding of the concepts of culture and identity. Both terms have been and continue to be used with very fluid boundaries. Culture is often linked with a set of practices and beliefs; it is constructed by both an individual's personal experience and also through traditions passed down generationally (Avruch, 2009). The fluidity of culture is also attributed to the fact that a group's or individual's culture is capable of changing over time. The complexity of culture makes it difficult to offer a specific and concrete definition. Thus we see various forms of definitions even amongst the leading experts in cultural studies. The broad definition offered by Anthropologist, Kevin Avruch is: "culture may be defined as socially inherited, shared, and learned ways of living possessed by persons by virtue of their membership in social groups" (Avruch, 2009). According to Avruch everyone has culture and often numerous cultures.

Defining identity faces similar issues to that of defining of culture. While building his construct of identity, Maalouf describes it as "what prevents me to be identical to anybody else" (2001, p. 10). Maalouf explains that identity is comprised of a number of elements that characterizes the individuality of a person. Often individuals will feel a stronger attachment and/or the need to protect one or two of their numerous identities.

We frequently see people strongly attached to their religious or national identities. However, these are only two of the essentially limitless pool of an individual's basis for self-identification (Maalouf, 2001). It has also been said, "identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized" (Connolly, 1991, p. 64). Thus often a person's most prominent and recognized identity is driven from the differences they have from those around them. However, overall, identity is a fluid concept that is very unique to an individual, with internal and external influences.

If these broad definitions are accepted, then it can be said that culture is an element of a person's identity. There is a connection between identity and culture; however, they are not interchangeable terms. Iranian Americans were able to build a new identity while becoming part of their host society. It has been stated, "through a process of diasporic immigration, Iranians absorb, reject, and assimilate specific elements from both Iranian and American cultures into their identities" (Mostofi, 2003, p. 682). It is this process of accepting and rejecting certain cultural elements that facilitates the development of dual-identities for migrants, and settles the community into a hybrid cultural existence.

Through his research, Mostofi found that Iranian Americans perceive themselves as being able to contain both American culture and Iranian culture. Iranian Americans view of what American identity is lies heavily in relation to a 'civic' identity and is associated with "American notions of liberalism, democracy, and laws" (Mostofi, 2003, p. 682). This group understands American identity as primarily being a political identity with no specific cultural traditions. This in turn provides space for Iranian American

identity to consist of “American notions of freedom and liberty and Iranian cultural traditions and concepts of the family” (Mostofi, 2003, p. 682).

In his research, Mostofi’s main question is whether or not the Iranian diaspora can constitute a community. He concludes “there is a real sense of ethnic membership but a community has yet to be established” (Mostofi, 2003, p. 691). Although one large community has not formed, which is nearly impossible with a population over 500,000, many smaller communities have been formed and are continuing to develop and strengthen. According to the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA), the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2010 American Community Survey found that there are 463,552 Iranians in the United States. However, many believe that the Census is under representative and there are actually between 500,000 and 1 million Iranians living in the United States (“Demographics & Statistics,” 2013).

It is paramount to look at the Iranian American diaspora’s current relationship with Iran. Although the population is diverse, most of these individuals are in the United States either directly or indirectly due to the 1979 revolution and its aftermath -- the development of the Islamic Republic. "The trauma of the Islamic revolution and subsequent immigration has left Iranian immigrants nostalgic for a homeland that no longer exists, for a constant regeneration of "the way things were" (Mostofi, 2003, p. 688). This statement will be similarly expressed in the following section, when looking at the literature on conflict-generated diasporas. Briefly, conflict-generated diasporas are often sustained by memories of trauma, which in turn makes them less willing to compromise and bring new ideas to the conflict resolution process (Lyons, 2004).

Mostofi's research stating that the diaspora is nostalgic for a homeland that no longer exists was conducted through an examination of the Iranian diaspora residing in southern California. By looking at several other research papers examining the Iranian diaspora, it became evident that most of them were conducted by studying the Californian diaspora population. Although this is the location housing the greatest number of Iranians in the United States, it is not representative of the entire diaspora population. Thus I would recommend broadening the area of research when looking at Iranian Americans. My research has indicated that Mostofi's conclusions focused on the Iranian diaspora in southern California does not include both the variegated nature of the immigrants, as well as the influence of the new generation of Iranians born in the United States. More recent research on the Iranian American community in Washington, D.C. as well as other regions is necessary to justify the diaspora's proximity to current political affairs and their potential to provide an integral link for future peace efforts.

The Iranian American diaspora is shaped by the political history and conflicts of the nation. Each wave of migration to the United States is marked by the historic events in Iran. Assimilation to the American culture is unique to each individual but can be understood through the framework of the conflict-generated diaspora. The rest of this chapter will examine the various migration phases of Iranians to the United States. Then there will be an examination of the assimilation process before concluding this section.

Migration Phases

“To gauge the diasporic make-up and political tendencies, one must take into account the different waves of migration and degrees of assimilation and identity in the

host country” (Shain, 1994, p. 815). In order to understand the disposition of the diaspora in the United States, I will go over the three dominant migration phases that have led to the development of the Iranian American diaspora. This will also include looking at the types of individuals who left and continue to leave Iran.

Although for over thirty years relations between Iran and the United States have been strained and at times almost entirely blocked, Iran’s borders have had a noticeable degree of openness (Hakimzadeh, 2006). Iran has been considered to be generating one of the highest rates of brain drain in the world, with most of these intellectually sharpened individuals resettling in Europe, Canada or the United States (Hakimzadeh, 2006). Brain drain is defined as a “term used to describe the emigration of a country’s most educated and highly skilled for better opportunities in another country” (Hakimzadeh, 2006).

Brain drain has been an issue faced by many countries around the world. Where their highly educated citizens, in hopes for more opportunities, or for fear of persecution, leave the country to resettle somewhere else. With the intention to reverse this brain drain, many countries have attempted to develop incentive programs for their educated diaspora to return (Vezzoli & Lacroix, 2010). The process of individuals leaving their country of origin, to return years later with new skillsets and increased knowledge, is known as ‘brain gain’ (Vezzoli & Lacroix, 2010).

Brain gain is essential for the transfer of human capital, also described as social remittances. The individuals, who come back to the country of origin, bring with them new perspectives, new skills, and new networks (Agunias & Newland, 2012). These educationally and professionally developed individuals have the potential to play large

leadership roles when they return back to their country of origin (Agunias & Newland, 2012).

An example of a recently highly recognized individual, who could be considered part of this process of brain gain, is Iran's newly elected president, Hassan Rouhani. In the 1990's, Rouhani received both a Masters in Philosophy and a PhD in Law, at a university in Scotland. This type of knowledge and skills transfer is usually highly desired by homeland governments. However, a complex aspect of this social remittance transfer is that often new understandings and notions of democracy are additionally brought back to the homeland. When the ideological differences between the home and host country are so strong, as is the case with Iran and the United States, the homeland governments may have a complex outlook in regards to social remittances and brain gain.

In addition, Iran is recognized by the United Nations Higher Commissions for Refuges 2009 Global Trends report, to be one of the world's largest refugee asylums (Hakimzadeh, 2006). The report states that between 2005 and 2009, Iran accepted an estimated 1,070,488 refugees primarily from Iraq and Afghanistan. Immigration and emigration, to and from, Iran is by no consideration a new phenomenon. The aspect we are particularly interested to further explore in this paper, are the various waves of emigration from Iran to the West, primarily examining emigration to the United States. This particular emigration can be described as having three primary waves (Hakimzadeh, 2006).

The first emigration phase was between 1950 and 1979, the time before the Islamic Revolution. The primary purpose individuals left Iran at this point was to attend

western universities and excel in education. In the mid-1900's, Iran's oil export revenue instigated a societal transition from traditionalism to modernization (Hakimzadeh, 2006). It was this acceptance of modernization and the desire to prosper socially, which encouraged members of the upper and middle class to send their children abroad to attain a western higher education. The intention was that these students would go abroad, primarily to the United States, but also to several other European countries; receive their education and then return to Iran.

In her research on the Iranian diaspora, Hakimzadeh offers valuable quantitative data on this first migration wave. Her data shows the growth of Iranians studying in the United States between the years of 1977 and 1980. In the 1977-1978 academic school year, Hakimzadeh claims that there were about 100,000 Iranians studying abroad, and that 36,220 of these individuals were registered at U.S. institutions. In the 1979-1980 academic school year, the number of Iranian's enrolled in U.S. institutions reached 51,310 students. Referencing the Institute of International Education, Hakimzadeh states "more Iranian students studied in the United States at this time than students from any other country" (2006). This interesting statistic gives insight into how dramatically U.S.-Iran relations have shifted over the past 30 years.

In addition to the group seeking education in the U.S., many religious refugees from Iran resettled in the United States during this first phase of migration. These religious refugees began to flee as soon as they noticed cracks in the Shah's regime that threatened religious individuals (Hakimzadeh, 2006). Most of these religious individuals

who fled Iran at this time, were part of religious minorities. This trend continued after the Iranian revolution of 1979.

After the revolution in Iran many of the Iranian students who originally intended to return to their homeland decided to stay in the United States, due to the internal turmoil of Iran. Initially, this population remained hopeful that they could one day return to Iran and have the same social and economic opportunities that were present pre-revolution. However, this never became the case and most of these individuals who initially planned to return, are still living in the United States over 30 years later (Hakimzadeh, 2006). According to a study describing the diaspora disposition, 37% of the Iranian diaspora as of 2007 immigrated to the United States before 1979 (Bozorghmehr & Douglas, 2011).

The second wave of migration occurred following the 1979 revolution, after the transition to the Islamic Republic. This migration group consisted of a wide variety of individuals, including; active socialist and liberalists avoiding persecution, young men avoiding military service during the Iran-Iraq War in early '80's, families and women fleeing the "overly confining gender restrictions," and many other intellectuals, entrepreneurs, and professionals foreseeing less opportunities in Iran (Hakimzadeh, 2006).

This phase of migration accelerated Iran's brain drain. This brain drain phenomenon can be exemplified by the fact that post-revolution, one out of every three physicians and dentists left Iran (Hakimzadeh, 2006). Similar to the first wave of migrants, individuals whom were part of this wave also did not intend to leave Iran

permanently. However, a large majority of them still currently continue to reside in the United States.

The third significant phase of migration started in 1995, and continues to this present day. Similar to the first wave of migrations, this wave is likewise split into two primary groups. It includes the educated and mid to high-income individuals seeking better educational and financial opportunities, and also the refugees and low-income and labor migrants. Of the low-income Iranian refugees, most of them were initially settled in Europe, primarily Germany. Some within this group made their way to the United States eventually. The United States is second in providing a home to the largest number of Iranians in this refugee group, after Germany (Hakimzadeh, 2006).

Many Iranians who came to the United States after the 1979 Revolution, especially those with financial means, settled in California. Bozorghmehr's study portrays that 37% of both 1st and 2nd generation Iranians living in the United States reside in California (2011). After California, there are large populations of Iranians in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area, in the New York and New Jersey area, as well as several metropolitan cities in Texas (Bozorghmehr & Douglas, 2011).

By looking at this migration history, it becomes evident that there is a diverse array of Iranians who moved to the United States. The majority of which is a mixture of well-educated Iranians and their families, as well as relocated political and religious refugees. Additionally, it is apparent that a majority of the diaspora has now spanned over the past three decades in the United States.

Again, qualitative research on Iranians and Iranian Americans has been conducted by examining the population in California. Having the largest population of Iranians, this area of focus can be easily justified. However, it is important to not limit vital research to just one region of the United States. Similarly, Iranians in other areas of the United States might yield different results. NIAC, the organization under analysis in this research, is primarily located in Washington, D.C.

This strategic location may be pivotal in understanding the potential influence of this organization. NIAC's proximity to the influential decision makers, the political capital of the United States and, to some extent, the political capital of the world, is valuable. Located in the nation's capital, the organization has the ability to get actively involved in politics and various events throughout the district, including influential hearings and proceedings on Capitol Hill. The impact of proximity to key stakeholders and the political network of the host county will be looked at further in the thesis.

U.S. Assimilation

It is fundamental to understand the assimilation process and status of Iranian Americans in order to understand their potential influence. The *Participation of Diasporas in Peacebuilding and Development* report states that integration is often "seen as a requirement for transnational engagement" (Horst et al., 2010, p. 17). The report continues to explain that diaspora individuals "who are most integrated in and familiar with existing opportunities and structures in their country of settlement are in the best position to contribute transnationally, as they have the necessary resources and networks

to do so” (Horst et al., 2010, p. 15). Thus it is important to understand the degree of assimilation of the various Iranian American diaspora populations.

As many Iranians left Iran and came to the United States they had to learn how to adjust to this new American culture. Psychologist Shirin Ghaffarian offers a comprehensive breakdown on this adjustment process, also known as acculturation. Citing the work of other social scientists, Ghaffarian explains the process of acculturation and one of the principle measurement methods of this process. This measurement scale known as the Cultural Life Style Inventory has three components to measure the adjustment process. These components are: “*cultural shifts* that are defined as a substitution of native customs with alternative cultural norms; *cultural incorporation*, defined as an adaptation of customs from both native and alternate cultures; and *cultural resistance*, defined as an active or passive resistance to alternate cultural norms” (Ghaffarian, 1998, p. 646).

Interestingly, many researchers have found paradoxical information about the immigrant adjustment process. Some researchers have found that immigrants whom retain their native cultural customs have difficulties adjusting. While other researchers found the opposite, that immigrants who abandon their native culture become very anxious and have difficulties adjusting (Ghaffarian, 1998). These differences may have resulted from different methods of measurement (Ghaffarian, 1998), or from examining immigrants from different homelands and cultural influences. The acculturation process may depend heavily on the specific culture an immigrant is coming from. Although generalizing immigrant experiences may seem productive and beneficial, there may be

increased value in narrowing the focus and looking at individual immigrant groups. This paper will not heavily focus on the acculturation and immigrant assimilation process. However, in order to understand the influence of the diaspora, it is beneficial to have a brief understanding of these processes.

Studies have shown that a more integrated and less stressful assimilation and acculturation process is more likely for younger immigrants who come to the United States (Ghaffarian, 1998). The older the individual is, the harder it becomes for them to negotiate between the new host land culture and their native culture (Ghaffarian, 1998).

As previously explained, a large portion of the Iranian migrants came to the United States to attend university. This indicates that they were still relatively young and in the prime years of developing their identity. The majority of individuals who came in the first wave of migration pre-revolution have currently spent most of their lives in the United States, and perhaps even all of their adult life.

It is also important to recognize that there are now a large number of second-generation Iranian migrants. These individuals were born and raised in the United States and are deeply connected to American culture, and thus have an intrinsic understanding of Americans and American mentality. They are similarly however connected to Iran; primarily this connection is through cultural and familial ties (Mostofi, 2003). The Iranian immigrant population in the United States is predominantly highly educated: “according to Census 2000, 50.9 percent of Iranian immigrants have attained a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 24.0 percent among the total foreign-born population” (Hakimzadeh & Dixon, 2006). The population is relatively highly assimilated to the

American lifestyle and has higher employment and income rates than the average migrant (Hakimzadeh & Dixons, 2006). This level of assimilation assists Iranian Americans in their ability and influence in being able to bring their two conflicting communities together.

One of the dominant reasons that most diaspora and migrant populations are assumed to be non-influential and disempowered relates to their limited ability to access local civil structures (Horst et al., 2010). Often these populations are confronted by a lack of information about opportunities, issues with language differences, unfamiliarity with different modes of organization, and suffer from a lack of relevant networks and high-levels of unemployment (Horst et al., 2010, p. 16).

The majority of the Iranian American diaspora do not face these challenges. The review of the literature related to the background of Iranian immigrants portrays the Iranian diaspora as highly educated and integrated in American society. Additionally, a large majority of the diaspora population have lived in the United States for a significant amount of time. These qualities support the diaspora's ability to play an influential role in peace-building between the United States and Iran.

Conclusion

A majority of Iranian Americans do perceive themselves as having merged American notions of democracy and law with Iranian cultural traditions and familiar ties. This identity merger is supportive in enforcing the fact that the diaspora contains a dual-identity.

The chapter additionally shed light on various elements relevant both to U.S.-Iran relations and to the Iranian American identity. The various migration phases were explored, as well as the concepts of brain drain and brain gain. The following chapter will comprehensively explore relevant literature pertaining to diasporas in general.

CHAPTER THREE: DIASPORA

In the past decade, the study of diaspora groups and individuals has increasingly become a growing area of interest. The topic of the influence and role of diaspora goes beyond disciplinary boundaries, and is examined in various fields, including political science, sociology, anthropology, and many others. In recent years, added attention has been given to the influence of diasporas in peace-building. However, prior to understanding that role, it is essential to have an awareness of what is meant by the word diaspora; the various elements it entails, its extremely heterogeneous nature, and the various relevant issues involved in the defining of diaspora. In this chapter, we will be examining these various aspects, while gaining a deeper understanding of the nature of diaspora.

Defining Diaspora

It is important to recognize that there is still no consensus among leading scholars over what exactly is meant by the word diaspora. The term is frequently used to describe different migrant populations; while some definitions contain a more inclusive value, others are very specific and exclusive. Prior to selecting the operational definition that will be used for the remainder of this paper, we will look at several of the dominant definitions outlined by leading scholars and diaspora experts.

Originally the term diaspora was used to describe the displaced Jewish population. Thus from the outset the term contained a strong association with suffering, loss and return (Päivi, Pirkkalainen, Abdile, & Mahdi, 2009). In *The Participation of Diasporas in Peacebuilding and Development*, a handbook developed by the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), diaspora was defined as “expatriated minority communities that have dispersed from the homeland, have a collective memory, believe in an eventual return, are committed to the maintenance or restoration of their homeland through transnational activities, and have a collective identity, group consciousness and solidarity” (2010, p. 6). This definition is exclusive and defines a very specific population. This definition does not account for the heterogeneous and ever-changing nature of diaspora, which is paramount to the understanding of many scholars.

Sociologist Nilou Mostofi in her study of the Iranian diaspora, gives a similar definition. She defines diaspora as referring to “the mass migration of peoples to various locations around the world. Throughout this migration, immigrants maintain a longing for their homeland and a desire to either return or preserve their nostalgia as a form of identification” (2003, p. 682). Similar to the definition provided by Päivi, Pirkkalainen, Abdile, & Mahdi, this definition also contains an element of return and of collective identification.

The final report of the 2006 Diaspora Conference, entitled *Capacity Building for Peace and Development: Roles of Diaspora*, provided many important points in regards to understanding diaspora. A comprehensive definition provided by a Special Advisor to the Secretary-General of the UN, Ambassador Mohamed Sahnoun, states that diasporas

have three important characteristics. These three characteristics include a claim to an ethnic or national origin; an association with a movement of people from the same origin; and still having contact with individuals in their country of origin (“Capacity Building for Peace and Development: Roles of Diaspora,” 2006, p. 10). The broadness of this definition is favorable, for it allows room for the fluidity and heterogenous nature of diaspora members and groups.

Another important and interesting distinction made in the *Capacity Building for Peace and Development: Roles of Diaspora* report was the element of self-identification as a prime characteristic of being part of a diaspora. The report indicates, “forum participants agreed that the definition of diaspora would have to go beyond borders, nation-states and passports and could only be ascribed by members’ own self-identification of belonging to a particular diaspora” (2006, p. 12). Stressing the significance of self-identification takes into account the multiplicity of identity. The report further explored how an individual’s identity is in constant flux, and how individuals are often faced with negotiating among their numerous identities. Persons who carry several national or ethnic identities, may at times recognize all of them, and may at times recognize only one. The dominant identity may be very context specific, while in a state of constant change and transition.

Self-identification also plays a large role when looking at second-generation migrants. Some of these individuals may have completely assimilated into their birth country and may have no attachment or desire to connect to their ancestral country. On the other hand, some of the second-generation may still be very connected to their

ancestral origin through strong cultural and familial ties. The potential for the relationship between the second-generation and their country of origin varies significantly between individuals. As such, individual self-identification plays a key role in defining who is a member of a diaspora and who is not.

Similarly, the first two definitions presented did not leave room for the second-generation to be a part of the diaspora. The second generation would not have a deep longing to return to the ancestral homeland, for they often would consider their place of birth their homeland. For this thesis, we will be including second generation Iranian Americans within the diaspora; thus a broad and inclusive definition is being favored.

The fact that the definitions and meaning of diaspora varies is commonly understood by many of the scholars examining the term in their perspective fields. Acknowledging this diverse definition of diaspora, Pirkkalainen, Päivi, Abdile & Mahdi state that “even though the definition may vary, ‘diaspora’ as a concept tends to build on three common criteria: dispersal; settlement in multiple locations; and, the idea of a ‘homeland’” (2009, p. 8). It is this open definition that allows space for the heterogynous nature and fluidity of diaspora. At the same time, this definition articulates three of the principle elements relevant to all diasporas. Thus, we will be using this inclusive definition throughout the remainder of the thesis. However, it is similarly important to remain mindful of the importance of self-identification when attempting to analyze and engage diasporas.

Homeland vs. Host Land

Two concepts that are frequently utilized when discussing diaspora are the concepts of homelands and host lands. Traditionally, the diaspora's country of ancestral origin is referred to as the homeland. As briefly covered earlier, several definitions of diaspora do include and are partially built on the idea of the diaspora group's desire to return to the homeland. However, there are many situations where the idea of homeland and host land is not as black and white as traditionally perceived. This can most easily be exemplified by considering the second-generation migrant population. This group of individuals was not born in the ancestral homeland and in many cases may have developed a stronger attachment and understanding of what would traditionally be called the diaspora's "host land." However, when the defined "host land" is self-identified to be an individual's homeland, the lines drawn by scholarly definitions are blurred and must be re-examined.

In the *Capacity Building for Peace and Development: Roles of Diaspora* report, Senior Researcher and a diaspora member, Simon Turner, in his own personal narrative portrayed several issues involved with the definitions of homeland and host land:

What I have been trying to teach my family is that I consider both Canada and Sierra Leone our home. I don't consider Canada as a host county; otherwise I wouldn't feel as though I could take advantages of the opportunities that are available in this country, not only to contribute to Canada but also to Sierra Leone. Don't put us in a box – let us focus on various identities and definitions (2006, p. 13).

In his narrative, Turner adequately exemplifies some of the issues with the defining of homeland and host land. The use of the terms homeland and host land can facilitate the diaspora group continuing to feel as though they are guests in their current country of residence and never fully accepted (“Capacity Building for Peace and Development: Roles of Diaspora,” 2006, p. 13). It is also equally important to recognize that not all diaspora members have the desire to move back “home.” Many members were either born in the “host land” or have developed most of their professional and social lives in the “host land.”

These complexities and the variation of diaspora members’ relationship to the country of origin and current country of residence are vast. It becomes difficult to provide terms that define the two separate nation spaces in a way that is appropriate and relates to all members of a diaspora. There needs to be more consideration in how we identify these two nation spaces. However, in order to maintain clarity within this paper, I will continue to use these two terms as they are traditionally utilized. Although, it is vastly important to be consciously aware that the terms homeland and host land are not completely appropriate and adequate in describing the diasporas relationship to these two places. The relationship is far more complex and heterogeneous.

It can be argued that many members of a diaspora may have had a similar experience of leaving the ‘homeland,’ and similar struggles of settling and developing in a new location. However, this situational parallelism should not override the fact that members of a diaspora are still very diverse. Werbner explains that diasporas are "stratified by class, caste, education, occupation, religious affiliation, cultural interests,

urban or rural background" (Werbner, 2000, p. 24). As previously mentioned, recent definitions of diaspora have also been inclusive of second-generation immigrants who unmistakably did not have the same experience of their parent(s) of leaving the 'homeland'. It is important to be aware of the complexities and conditions that develop diaspora groups. Understanding their relation to homeland and the host land may be paramount to bringing new ideas and awareness to global conflicts.

Conflict-Generated Diasporas

A breadth of the research connecting diaspora to conflict resolutions focuses on the concept of 'conflict-generated diaspora'. This population is defined as "originating from violent settings, but are not necessarily recognized as refugees according to international law" (Päivi et al., 2009, p. 8). The Iranian population which left Iran during the 1979 revolution or immediately after, along with those studying abroad who never returned to Iran due to the revolution, would be considered part of the conflict-generated diaspora. This specific group of the diaspora has traditionally been characterized by a "strong sense of attachment to the homeland" (Lyons, 2004, p. 1).

The existing literature also emphasizes the idea of returning to the country of origin if and when the conflict there is resolved. Although it makes ample sense to return to your homeland after your reason for leaving is no longer existent, in some cases it should be re-examined. In the case of Iran's 1979 revolution, many of the members of the conflict-generated diaspora have now spent most of their lives in the host land. Although a connection to the homeland may run very deep, a portion of the diaspora

population is now much more comfortable and developed, economically and socially, in their current country of residence.

The relationship diaspora members continue to have to their homeland may be important for understanding their influence, power and desire to act as potential peace-builders or conflict resolvers. This relationship will be examined a bit further when looking at NIAC's connection to Iran. However, a more comprehensive and in-depth look at this connection would be beneficial for a deeper understanding on the Iranian diaspora and its multiplicity.

Conflict-generated diasporas may be more inclined to be politically active for they have a very direct connection to the conflict in the homeland. It has been stated that "an individual's own experience of conflict and violence may have a deep impact on the responsibility he or she feels to support others who may still be facing conditions" (Horst et al., 2010, p. 19). The conflict-generated diaspora may be much more willing and inspired to get involved in their homeland conflict. However, this may not always prove to be beneficial.

According to Collier, diasporas often continue to foster grievances as a way of maintaining connection to their homeland (Collier, 2006). Lyons further explains that conflict-generated diasporas that were "created and sustained by memories of trauma tend to be less willing to compromise and therefore reinforce and exacerbate the protractedness of conflict" (2004, p. 1). A common concern of external actors whom consider working with diasporas to confront the homeland conflict, is the fear that "organizations or individuals belonging to such groups are religiously motivated,

‘politicized’, ‘fragmented or simply ‘biased’ towards their own families, clans or ethnic groups” (Horst et al., 2010, p. 20).

It is understandable how populations that were directly affected by a conflict may struggle in being a bridge between their host country and a home country they might carry resentment towards. However, as diaspora individuals become more integrated into their country of residence and develop strong ties and attachment to the society they reside in, they will be better equipped to confront conflicts in a more appropriate and less biased way. These individuals who perceive themselves to have dual-identities and multi-lateral understanding of their homeland and their host land are the most suitable ‘bridges’ and can offer genuine new insights and ideas to both communities.

Conclusion

This chapter provided us a review of various literatures pertaining to diaspora. Having explored the complexities of defining diaspora, as well as their heterogeneousness and changing nature, we are now more apt to understand this population’s potential influence, and the ways in which the diaspora can be involved and engaged. A fitting perspective is that, “rather than automatically considering the diaspora to be united, it is more useful to view the diaspora as moral and political communities that can in certain contexts be mobilized towards certain common goals” (Pirkkalainen, Päivi, Abdile & Mahdi, 2009, p. 9).

I will continue to look at the various ways in which a diaspora can be involved in conflicts and the different roles they can play. I will then widen our scope to introduce a suitable criterion for gauging the effectiveness of diaspora organizations and their

potential influence. This criterion will then be used to analyze one of the most prominent Iranian diaspora organizations in the United States.

CHAPTER FOUR: DIASPORA ENGAGEMENT

Increasingly, scholars, analysts and politicians are become more aware of the potentials behind engaging diasporas as a new method of confronting global conflicts. This is exemplified in a remark made by former President of the UN General Assembly, Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa, when she stated, “we need global solutions to global challenges and I believe that global solutions can be found through multilateral and multi-stakeholder cooperation. Diaspora communities are key stakeholders. Within the UN system we will continue to work to provide a platform for diaspora communities to be heard” (“Capacity Building for Peace and Development: Roles of Diaspora,” 2006). Khalifa is recognizing the importance of engaging diasporas. In the same report, it was acknowledged that there is still much uncertainty in the most effective ways to engage diaspora populations and how to strengthen diaspora contributions, which was one of the focuses of the report. I will begin this chapter by looking at the various roles diasporas may take in conflict and conflict resolution.

Role of Diaspora in Conflict

Most of the literature relating to diaspora and conflict has traditionally framed diasporas as a force that fuels conflict in the homeland. One of the highest referenced and recognized source is Paul Collier’s World Bank research, which found that having a large

diaspora in the United States is a central risk factor to renewed conflict (Collier, 2006). The study states that, “by far the strongest effect of war on the risk of subsequent war works through diasporas. After five years of post conflict peace, the risk of renewed conflict is around six times higher in societies with the largest diasporas in America than those without American diasporas. Presumably this effect works through the financial contributions of diasporas to rebel organizations” (Collier, 2006).

Various diasporas have indeed played a large role in fueling the conflict in their homeland. This dynamic was seen in the Lebanese Civil War, where the 1.5 to 2.5 billion dollars that was being sent back home from the diaspora community every year facilitated the prolonging of the conflict (Picard, 2005). Similar effects of usage of remittance have been seen in various countries throughout the world. Remittances sent back to the homeland from the diaspora will be explored further in this paper.

Although the predominant perspective on the diasporas role in conflict is a negative one, it is definitely not their only influence. As more attention is being given to the influence of diaspora, many are beginning to see the potential for the diaspora to act as a new tool to be used with certain global conflicts. Diasporas have the potential to act both as a force that further protracts a conflict and also as a force that can bring new ideas and perspectives to the resolution and peacemaking process (Lyons, 2004).

The *Capacity Building for Peace and Development: Roles of Diaspora report*, states “diasporas can be leaders in the development of global citizenship since they are frequently citizens who think and act beyond traditional or established nation-state frontiers” (2006, p. 26). Many of our current global conflicts have elements of ethnicity

and nationality tied into them. The connection between diaspora and “global citizenship” is an interesting one and may prove to be beneficial in our current world affairs. Only in recent years has more attention been given to this peace-building role of diaspora, and the potential to bring new ideas.

Before exploring the various demonstrations of the role of a diaspora in conflict, it is important to note the focus of most of the existing literature. The literature on diasporas and conflict primarily pertains to a diaspora’s role and influence in the internal conflict or conflicts of their homeland. There is a gap in research regarding the influence of diasporas in bringing new perspectives and approaches to a conflict between their host and home country. Very little attention and research has been conducted on a diaspora’s influence in a conflict between their ancestral homeland and their host land. It is this relationship that is worth exploring: the role of the Iranian diaspora in the United States, and its effectiveness, strengths and limitations in acting as a peace-builder between the United States and Iran.

Fortunately, there is a fair amount of literature that explores the concept of dual-identities, which is relevant to this thesis. Several identity scholars and experts explain how individuals with dual-identities are able to act as bridges between these two perhaps conflicting identity groups. Although, the term diaspora is often not utilized, these scholars are undoubtedly touching on the dynamics and characteristics of diaspora individuals.

A diaspora’s ability to act as a bridge between two communities may be essential in reaching new solutions for protracted and stalemated conflicts. Lebanese-American

expert on identity, Amin Maalouf, explains the challenges an individual may face when containing hybrid identities, specifically when the two identities have historically been in conflict with each other. However, Maalouf views the challenge positively, stating that these individuals have a role to “act as bridges, go-betweeners, mediators between the various communities and cultures” (2001, p. 5).

Similar sentiments are shared among other scholars; Pirkkalainen, Päivi, Abdile, & Mahdi articulate “due to an increased level of global interconnectedness through cheap modes of transportation and communication, diaspora groups are also more than ever before able to build strong links between their country of origin and their host country” (2009, p. 8). Likewise, Shain and Barth state, “diasporas are increasingly able to promote transnational ties, to act as bridges or as mediators between their home and host societies” (Shain & Barth, 2003, p. 450). Khalifa similarly states, “diaspora communities are uniquely endowed with the multi cultural experiences which allow us to transcend false perceptions of “the other.” They must raise their voice for peace and development” (“Capacity Building for Peace and Development: Roles of Diaspora,” 2006).

Further on in the *Capacity Building for Peace and Development: Roles of Diaspora* report, it was noted “their cultural, social and language links put diasporas in a unique position” (2006). This connection makes the diaspora more sensitive to the “ebb and flows” of the conflict, thus they may be more able to understand and monitor the conflict affecting their homeland better than those whom are not directly connected to the conflict (2006, p. 9). It has similarly been stated that diaspora members have a “level of

emotional commitment and personal motivation that is unmatched by other actors” (Horst et al., 2010, p. 12).

It is discernible that diaspora populations are viewed to be potential bridges; they are a population that can offer clarity when historical tension and cultural misunderstandings are ever so present. The political history and historic mistrust between the Iran and the United States may very well benefit from diaspora engagement and insight. I will now explore various ways diaspora groups have traditionally been engaged and involved.

Ethnic Lobbies

A central method by which diasporas act as a bridge between the host and home societies is to organize and operate as lobbies in the liberal host country (Shain and Barth, 2003). Often the politically engaged diaspora populations will function as “advocates of a multicultural foreign policy” (Shain and Barth, 2003, p. 450). It has been said that our current understanding of foreign policymaking does not take into considerations the significant role organized societal groups can play (Haney & Vanderbush, 1999, p. 342).

Shain explains, “the openness of the American political system to ethnic politics has allowed many newly organized diasporas to acquire a meaningful voice in U.S. foreign policy, especially on issues concerning countries of origin” (1994, p. 812). Similarly, Haney and Vanderbush explain that “in an era when security threats are less pressing, when Congress is more engaged, and when the distinction between “foreign” and “domestic” politics is less clear, many have pointed to the increasing activism, if not always influence, of ethnic groups in U.S. foreign policy” (1999, p. 341). All of these

scholars recognize that the American political system is becoming ever more open to ethnic group activism and input.

Haney & Vanderbush further explain how during the Cold War, the foreign policy decision-making was primarily dominated by the President. Today Congress is much more active, which provides additional room for interest groups to be listened to and heard. Haney & Vanderbush state “interest groups are more likely to be influential when congressional involvement is necessary and presidential popularity is low” (1999, p. 344). They continue to explain how the success of ethnic interest groups rise when the policy in question commands a congressional role (1999, p. 344).

Shain & Barth describe the role of the diaspora to be one of three in the international arena. The first group described is “passive actors.” These are individuals who, despite their own personal desire, get involved in international relations. An example of this would be refugee groups that need international help (host country support) for protection.

The second group consists of “active actors, influencing the foreign policies of their hostlands” (Shain & Barth, 2003, 453). Organizations such as American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) fall under this category, as well as the organization central to this thesis, NIAC. Briefly NIAC is a non-partisan and nonprofit organization, which is “dedicated to advancing the interests of the Iranian-American community.” One of the main objectives of NIAC is to be the voice of insight and knowledge on Iran to American lawmakers, in hopes that these individuals will be able to make informed decisions in regards to policies that affect both Iranian Americans and Iranian civil

society. This organization and its efforts will be examined and analyzed in extensive detail further in this thesis

The third group described is active actors that are working to influence foreign policy of their country of origin (Shain & Barth, 2003). The ability of diaspora members and groups to influence the foreign policy of their homeland is often connected to the current regime in power. Based on the current authoritarian regime in Iran, the third role of diaspora as described by Shain & Barth is very limited. There are often various diasporic efforts encouraging human rights and democracy in Iran. Although this may not be directly linked to foreign policy, it is a part of the vast ideological differences between Iran and the West, which play a role in the historical tensions. The intention of combating Iran's human rights violations is also central to NIAC's mission and purpose. However, it becomes very hard to determine how effective, if at all, these specific efforts of diaspora organizations have been.

Remittance

As mentioned previously, a main source of diaspora engagement in a conflict regarding the homeland is through remittance. Both during times of conflict, but also during peace, diasporas often send large sums of money back to their home country. Although Collier has looked at this dynamic as a system that fuels conflict, it can also play a large role in post-conflict reconstruction and humanitarian aid (Päivi et al., 2009). Although the exact figures of how much remittance is sent from the diaspora to the homeland annually is unknown, estimates of tens of millions of dollars have often been

used (Päivi et al., 2009, p. 12). This significant amount of money sent back is often questioned as to whether it is beneficial or harmful to conflict.

Pirkkalainen, Päivi, Abdile, & Mahdi state that through remittances a diaspora “can make a positive contribution to the stabilization and transformation of the social or class conflict of the economically disadvantaged” (2009, p. 13). The diaspora often sends money back to low-income communities, and/or their own less privileged families. One Iranian diaspora organization that has been involved in this effort is Children of Persia. This organization’s mission is to help the needy children and their families in Iran. The organization holds several annual fundraising events in the Washington D.C. area, targeting primarily the Iranian diaspora community. The money raised is then sent to various thoroughly-examined and selected projects in Iran that support disadvantaged children. This type of remittance is described as collective remittance, or “funds allocated [by the diaspora] to meet particular community needs” (Päivi et al., 2009, p. 24).

There are two types of remittances that are sent back to the homeland. One as described above, are collective remittances. The second type is individual remittances. This consisted of the money sent back by individuals to their family. Diasporas often heavily engage in the sending of both types of these remittances.

Pirkkalainen, Päivi, Abdile & Mahdi additionally mention how in many conflicts the remittances sent by the diaspora truly serve as “vital humanitarian functions” (2009, p. 25). When financial assets are sent to the homeland with this intention, it can be extremely beneficial in reconstructing the society after prolonged economic, societal, and

perhaps even physical hardship and conflict. In regards to Iran, this can be exemplified after several of the natural disasters that affected the country.

In 2003, Iran experienced a devastating earthquake. The Bam earthquake killed around 31,000 individuals (“Earthquake Information for 2003,” n.d.). During this time the Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) “issued a temporary authorization to allow people living in the United States to make donations to nongovernmental organizations working to aid the victims” (“U.S. Iran Sanctions Exempt Food, Medicine, Remittances,” 2013). A large amount of money was sent back to Iran from the diaspora in order to provide relief and support after this tragedy. Similarly, after another earthquake in August of 2012, the diaspora again played a role in financing post-disaster relief and reconstruction efforts.

In regards to Iran, the dependence of local NGOs in Iran on remittance is unreliable. After the Bam earthquake the OFAC temporary authorizations were suspended only a year later. This left many of the projects that were supported by NGOs aboard and individuals in the United States unfinished permanently. Another diaspora organization, Iranian Alliances Across Borders (IAAB), held a seminar discussing Bam and its aftermath. At this seminar, emphasis was put on the fact that post-disaster remittance may be more beneficial if it came in a more qualitative manner. This meant that the money sent back would be largely used to support long-term efforts. It was also suggested that the money be spent to purchase blankets and first-aid in the United States and that those essential items would then be sent to Iran.

Although the sending of remittances might not always be the most beneficial way of supporting individuals in the homeland, it does still have substantial benefits. It can clearly be seen that sending remittance is a large part of the role of the diaspora. It has similarly been stated “remittances have widely been acknowledged as a major source of finances at the national, regional, and household levels” (Horst et al., 2010, p. 9).

It has been argued that often during times of conflict, warring parties often confiscate the remittance that are being sent back to the homeland. Similarly, it has been argued that the communities use the money that was sent back to further protract the conflict. However, Prikkalainen, Paivi, Adbile & Mahdi’s study on various diasporas explains that “for many families, remittances are the only source of income to meet their daily and basic needs” (2009, p. 24). While Collier described this as a tool that fuels conflict, it can just as well be seen as a support that alleviates suffering during or post conflict.

Relationship to Homeland

Another important aspect to examine in the influence of a diaspora is their current relationship to their ancestral homeland. Diasporas have often been described as having “romanticized views of their country and community of origin” (Päivi et al., 2009, p. 18), which may affect the accuracy of their perception on the current condition of their homeland. Shain & Barth explain how many Israelis say that the Jewish-American diaspora should not influence or get involved in internal Israeli security policies for they do not “pay in blood” for the policies and decisions that are made (2003, p. 456). This perspective is expressed by various scholars who similarly describe the diasporas

perception of their homelands internal conflict as altered from the reality of the situation. Pirkkalainen, Päivi, Abdile & Mahdi articulate how often diaspora members are ‘alienated’ from what is going on in the conflict and thus are merely “playing out their own fantasies” (2009, p. 18).

In some cases diasporas may be better equipped to play a role in conflict analysis and efforts toward resolution by the mere fact that they may have access to areas that are inaccessible to others. For example, after the 2009 Iranian election, while it may have been hard for an American to enter Iran and gain access to various protesters and organizers, this role would have been less complicated and feasible for an Iranian citizen. On the other hand, homeland governments may also try to influence and control diaspora activity. Through various methods of surveillance, primarily online, governments can monitor members of the diaspora (Shain, 1994). Fear of a repressive government may play a large role in the number of diaspora individuals who get involved in the conflict. If the government becomes aware of activity they gravely disapprove of, there is potential for punishment. These punishments may take the form of confiscation of property, imprisonment upon return, prohibition to leave the country, and citizenship removal (Shain, 1994). Diaspora activity post Iranian elections in 2009 can again prove to be an adequate example. Many individuals who were highly active and visibly protesting against the government through their own blogs, or various other online activities, are now appropriately fearful of returning to Iran. It is this fear of the repressive government that has a hand in the way the diaspora chooses to engage in conflict pertaining to the homeland.

Effective Engagement Criterion

The question of how diaspora organizations can facilitate peace processes and reconciliation most effectively is still debated. There are still arguments on whether or not diaspora engagement further protracts a conflict or contributes positively (Horst et al., 2010). However, many scholars would agree that diaspora organizations are “a key part of civil society activism and [that] they can play a number of roles in conflict and attempt to build peace within divided societies” (Sinatti, 2010, p. 9).

As interest in the role of diaspora has increased, scholars, analysts and diaspora experts have begun to work towards understanding how diasporas can be empowered to assist in bringing peace to global conflicts. Several scholarly papers have been published that describe various criteria that make diaspora organizations effective. By examining and exploring these various criteria we will be able to properly evaluate the selected Iranian American diaspora organization, NIAC, effectively.

Before dissecting the criterion used to gauge a diaspora organization’s effectiveness and influence, it is important to have an operational definition of what is meant by a diaspora organization. For this thesis we will be using the definition provided in the *Participation of Diasporas in Peacebuilding and Development* report. This definition states that a diaspora organization consist of “voluntary as well as professional organizations. In the case of organizations with mixed membership, an organization is considered to be a diaspora organization when the majority of its board members have a diaspora background” (2010, p. 6).

Pirkkalainen, Päivi, Abdile & Mahdi explain how a diaspora gains their influence by being empowered. Their level of empowerment depends on several elements, which are said to be: organization structure; geographical location; living conditions and legal status in country of residence; political attitudes towards country of origin - its conflicts and shared identity; motivation and resources for constructive engagement; contact with key political leaders in both country of origin and country of settlement (2009, p. 31). Similar to this criterion describing conditions relevant to diaspora empowerment are the criterion developed by DIASPEACE.

DIASPEACE is an organization that “seeks to generate policy-relevant, evidence-based knowledge on how exiled populations from conflict regions play into the dynamics of peace and conflict in their country of origin” (Sinatti, 2010, p. 2). This project is funded by the European Commission, thus looks primarily at the roles of diaspora populations residing in Europe. However, much of their information can be used multilaterally and applied to diaspora organizations in the United States.

The DIASPEACE criteria gauging a diaspora organization’s potential to be effective and influential is comprehensive, and thus it is this criterion that will be used to analyze NIAC. The intentions of DIASPEACE for developing this criteria was for the purpose of assisting governments of the diaspora’s host land, international agencies, and NGOs in identifying diaspora organizations which may be beneficial and valuable in peace-building efforts (Sinatti, 2010, p. 17).

There are eight key criteria identified. However, this is not meant to be completely normative criteria that every organization should be judged by. It is important

to be aware of the organization's mission and purpose and then apply elements of the criterion that are relevant to that specific organization (Sinatti, 2010). While going over the various criterion provided by DIASPEACE, information from other scholars and experts that relate to each specific criterion will be included.

The first criterion is *transparency* within the organizations. This criterion states that organizations must be clear in their structure, mode of governance and decision-making process (Sinatti, 2010). The organization must have clear rules and procedures. Similarly, there must be clarity and transparency in how the supervisory board is developed and how they are structured to over-see other individuals working for the organization (Sinatti, 2010).

The second criterion is *inclusiveness* of the organization. As explained previously, a key fear in engaging diasporas, specifically conflict-generated diasporas, is that they are biased towards a certain community, religion or clan. That is why it is highly significant to be mindful of whether the organization is inclusive and open to all members of their diaspora, regardless of the divisions that might be plaguing the community at large.

The third criterion is *accountability* within the organization. This is important for it shows the organization's dedication and commitment to continue their efforts. In judging accountability it is beneficial to look at the organization's processes, procedures, records and audit reports (Sinatti, 2010).

The fourth criterion is *cooperation with institutions and individuals in the country of residence*. The *Participation of Diasporas in Peacebuilding and Development* report

shared similar sentiments, stating “having a good network in the country of settlement provides diaspora members with an opportunity to act as bridge builders” (2006, p. 12). The report also discussed the importance of diaspora members accepting full citizenship, and taking on political, social and economic roles in their new country of residence (2006). Studies have shown that by being more integrated into the host land society, there is more potential for influence.

This element can be measured by looking at the ways the organization networks with and has access to other institutions and organizations in their host country. It has been shown that “those who are most integrated in and familiar with existing opportunities and structures in their country of settlement are in the best position to contribute transnationally, as they have the necessary resources and networks to do so” (Horst et al., 2010, p. 15). Similarly, Haney & Vanderbush explain that a key criterion for ethnic interest group success lies in whether they are “politically proximate to the locus of decision-making” (Haney & Vanderbush, 1999, p. 344).

The fifth criterion is *cooperation within the diaspora and transnational ties*. The more diasporas are connected across borders and the more transnational they are, the more likely that they can be successful in having influential interventions in their homeland (Sinatti, 2010, p. 19). Similarly, the *Participation of Diasporas in Peacebuilding and Development* report indicates that transnational ties can develop into a principle strategic political resource (2010, p. 10).

Haney & Vanderbush explain that one of the roots of ethnic interest group success lies in membership unity. They explain that the more members of the diaspora can vote in

a concentrated bloc and the more there exists a unified voice, the potential for the organization to have influence grows (1999). This is primarily significant when analyzing diaspora organizations that are politically active, and are lobbying the government to meet their group's needs and hear their group's voice.

The sixth criterion is the diaspora's *perceptions on peace and conflict* in their country of origin. This should take into account how the organization understands the conflict and the various dynamics involved in the conflict. Similarly, this criterion judges the ability of the organization to follow and understand changes and shifts within the conflict. It is difficult to evaluate this criterion. However, looking at the background of the key players and heads of the organization may provide a solid backbone for understanding the organization's overall perception on peace and conflict.

The seventh criterion is the organization's *engagement strategies*. It is important to see how the aims of the organization are compatible with the purposes of peace, reconciliation, or community building (Sinatti, 2010, p. 19). The criterion states that, "the organizations should be explicitly peaceful and have the ability to challenge attitudes and identification patterns that have a potential to generate conflict" (Sinatti, 2010, p. 19). It is also important to recognize and evaluate the ways in which the organization pursues their purpose. Answering how they are engaging their community, and also other communities is beneficial in attempting to evaluate against this criterion.

Haney & Vanderbush explain the importance of the diaspora organization's salience and resonance of their message. They explain how in addition to appealing to the government, it is important to shape public opinion around the organization's cause.

Haney & Vanderbush explain how ethnic-interest organizations can be more successful if they “successfully appeal to symbols of America” and “cast [their] position in terms of so-called oppositionless issues” (1999). For example, these if these organizations are able to frame their cause around democracy and human rights, ideals that are hard to argue against in their host country, it is more beneficial to them, for it cannot as easily be refuted.

There has also been emphasis on the importance of diaspora organizations to engage in civic oriented activities. These civic oriented activities could include: community development, skills development, networking, youth initiatives, inter-diasporic partnership, and other educational and advocacy initiatives. It is commonly understood that civil society has a vital “role to play in sustaining peace and democracy” and that engaging on the “grassroots level is central to building lasting peace” (Päivi et al., 2009, p. 30).

The eighth criterion relates to the *sustainability* of the diaspora organizations. Organizations need to be evaluated on the sustainability of their programs, and whether they can maintain their structure and membership. Often diaspora organizations may struggle with financing their cause. Many organizations often only exist on paper due to the inability to finance the organizations and cause (Sinatti, 2010). Similarly, many diaspora organizations are dependent on an individual who brings the energy and resources to run several events and mobilize the organization. However, having a structure that is dependent on one person is unsustainable, and often these organizations collapse after that individual leaves (Sinatti, 2010, p. 19). Haney & Vanderbush,

furthermore emphasize that an important factor for these organizations' success lies in their financial resources (1999).

Another difficult task of these diaspora organizations is being able to maintain a presence in their home country. This often proves to be a challenge, and is highly dependent on the relationship between the home country and the diaspora. In Iran, many diaspora organizations that came to run projects were forced to shutdown due to strained relationships and mistrust between the home and host country governments.

These criteria, in my view, represent universal democratic values that are inclusive for the benefit of the whole population, and potentially the people of the home country. They uphold unity, trustworthiness, equal rights, truthfulness, transparency, openness, justice, fairness, clarity, communication, . . . and many more qualities essential for upholding and establishing a ground-up community. I therefore intend to use these criteria, in the following chapter, to evaluate the potential level of influence of the National Iranian American Council diaspora organization (NIAC). It is the individual and collective contribution of such diaspora organizations, with internalized values and qualifications stated above, that would bring new ideas, deeper understanding, and a fresh perspective to the historically charged conflict between Iran and the United States.

CHAPTER FIVE: OVERVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF NIAC

Introduction

In this section, an analysis will be made of one of the most prominent Iranian-American organizations, National Iranian American Council (NIAC). This organization is primarily located in Washington D.C., but has representatives in numerous cities across the United States. Most of the information gathered for analyzing this organization is based on their website and various publications either by the organization or about the organization.

By conducting this analysis, I am hoping to understand the existing influence and strengths of this organization in regards to U.S.-Iran relations. Also, this analysis can illuminate areas of improvement, which may be beneficial in making the Iranian American diaspora more significant and effective in acting as a bridge and peace builder between their two historically conflicting communities.

NIAC was chosen to be the diaspora organization to be analyzed, primarily because they are the most visible and politically engaged. Through various means, NIAC is committed to “advancing the interest of the Iranian-American community.” The mission statement of the organization directly relates to the purpose and role we are attempting to understand: the role of diaspora organizations in acting as a bridge between two distinct communities. The organization’s mission statement reads as followed:

“**Advocacy:** We advance the interests of the Iranian American Community on civic, cultural and political issues.

Education: We supply the resources, knowledge and tools to enable civic participation and informed decision making.

Community Building: We provide the infrastructure for bridge-building across the network of Iranian American organizations and the peoples of America and Iran.”

It is evident that NIAC’s mission and intention is directly related to supporting the assimilation and participation of Iranians in the United States. Similarly, there is explicit statement of the organization’s role in acting as a bridge between the Iranian and American communities, both within the United States and Iran.

Haney & Vanderbush explain how ethnic interest groups usually come into existence “from the American polity in response to social or economic change” (1999, p. 343). This particular organization, NIAC, was founded shortly after the tragic events of 9/11. For it was at this pivotal time that the United States was faced with profound decisions of national security and immigration. These issues greatly affected the Iranian community. The tragic events of 9/11 caused tremendously heightened suspicions of Middle Easterners and Muslims. These negative feelings were strongly encouraged by numerous media outlets and politicians who would constantly emphasize the fact that it was Muslims who executed these horrific acts of terror. This type of rhetoric used by many influential actors in the public, enforced the perceptual linkage between terrorists and Muslims. This unfortunate collective understanding supported the growing culturally

violent and incorrect perception that all terrorists are Muslims, and thus we should be cautious of Muslims. This directly affected many Iranians, for most of this group does have dark features, and are commonly perceived to be Muslim. The historic conflict between the two countries also has fed this level of suspicion.

Not long after the 9/11 events, the U.S. Patriot Act was signed into law by then President George W. Bush. The intention of this act was to combat, deter, and punish terrorists and acts of terror. Through the passing of the Patriot Act, several civil liberties of American citizens were put at risk in the effort to protect against terrorism. This includes the ability for the government to utilize wiretaps legally and search suspicious individuals and property without a warrant. Similarly, the Patriot Act encouraged airport security officials to conduct searches and extra screening on individuals they deemed suspicious. In Susan Hirsh's article *Deploying Law as a Weapon*, she describes how critics of the Patriot Act were primarily concerned with the infringement on civil liberties, stating that "they decried the fear and oppression experienced by people deemed a suspect population, especially immigrants, Muslims, and Arabs, and condemned the reliance on racial and religious profiling" (Hirsch, 2010, p. 297).

Living in a society that constantly pushes the image of a Muslim Middle Eastern terrorist, left airport security officials little choice other than targeting Muslim looking individuals, including Iranians. The Patriot Act said to target suspicious looking individuals (structural violence) and the collective consciousness at that time was that Muslims are suspicious (cultural violence). Galtung's Triangle of Violence shows how interrelated cultural and structural violence are in this situation. The culturally violent

perceptions encourage structural violence, which goes on to facilitate the growth of more cultural violent perceptions, as well as animosity on the side of the targeted victims. Hirsch exemplifies this point by stating “the hundreds of primarily Muslim men apprehended in the United States in the months after 9/11 experienced firsthand the anguish of investigation and detention, although few were ever formally charged with crimes” (Hirsh, 2010, p. 299).

It was in this time of heightened security and increased focus on immigration that the founders of NIAC realized that the Iranian community was essentially voiceless and unable to get their growing concerns heard. Thus in 2002, the organization emerged in an effort to be the voice of the Iranian American community. The organization intends to play a constructive and influential role in representing the Iranian American community and interests on Capitol Hill.

Criterion

I will continue the analysis of this organization by going over each of the elements in DIAPEACE diaspora engagement criterion delineated earlier. I will evaluate and analyze the organization’s transparency, inclusiveness, accountability, cooperation with institutions and individuals in the United States, cooperation within diaspora and transnational ties, perceptions on peace and conflict, engagement strategies, and finally the sustainability of the organization. Although these eight criteria stand distinctly from one another, often the information presented in one can also be used in satisfying another criterion as well. Thus we will see a degree of fluidity between the information provided to meet various criterions. DIAPEACE explains that diaspora organizations that fit this

criterion well are in a positive position to act as constructive peace-builders and bridges. When this criterion is met by an organization, DIAPEACE encourages larger state and international agencies to engage with the organization, for the fruits of this engagement can be advantageous for peace.

Transparency

The transparency of NIAC will be primarily judged by examining the openness and clarity of their organizational structure. It will be beneficial to understand how the board members are appointed into their positions and the overall decision-making process of the organization. Similarly, transparency of their mission and initiatives is significant.

The organizations website www.niacouncil.org is highly organized and coherent. Under the ‘Staff & Board’ tab, the organizational structure is precisely articulated. NIAC’s staff and board currently consists of seven individuals on the team of Staff, seventeen individuals of the Board of Directors, and fourteen individuals on the Advisory Board. Each of these individuals has a fairly comprehensive biography accessible for viewing.

The organization claims to be chiefly piloted by the Board of Directors. This group of individuals consists of distinguished entrepreneurs and businessmen/women, highly noted professors, lawyers, various types of consultants, and individuals from diverse medical fields. The Board of Directors is elected to staggered three-year terms. This group meets twice a year with the Staff to “review plans and develop strategies for short term and longer terms of the organization.” Additionally, the Board of Directors “oversees the operation of the organization, reviews reports, evaluates progress, and

ensures that the organization continues to progress in fulfilling its mission and goals.”

The president of the organization, Trita Parsi, sits on the Board, in addition to being part of the Staff team.

Trita Parsi was a co-founder of the organization in 2002. He is an expert on U.S.-Iranian relations, Iranian foreign politics, as well as, the geopolitics of the Middle East. One of Parsi’s highly recognized books is, “Traacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the U.S.” In 2010, Parsi was the recipient of the Grawemeyer Award for Ideas Improving World Order. This award was granted for the various insights and clearly articulated perceptions Parsi shared in his book. I will delve more into understanding Parsi’s background and experience when analyzing NIAC’s perceptions towards peace and conflict.

The Staff of this organization are primarily hired through a standard hiring process. Open positions are posted in the ‘Career & Internships’ section of their website. The seven individuals on the Staff team are responsible for day-to-day activities of this organization. Of these seven staff members, five of them are part of the Iranian diaspora, while two of them are American. This is significant for it shows that this organization is already extending beyond its own diaspora members, and including other individuals from American civil society as part of its leadership team.

The Advisory Board is comprised of “prominent individuals from varying backgrounds with a wide range of knowledge and expertise.” The role of these individuals is to provide “advice to NIAC’s Board of Directors in order to ensure that all

its activities further the group's goal of encouraging Iranian-American participation in American civic life.”

The governing structure of this organization is very clear and transparent. Solely from looking at their website, one is able to get a well-defined understanding of the organization's structure, and there seems to be very little ambiguity. This transparency highlights and strengthens NIAC's ability to play a peace-building role in U.S.-Iran historic tensions and relations. Additionally, this degree of transparency makes it easier and more likely that other institutions and organizations will feel comfortable in engaging with and utilizing the efforts of NIAC.

Furthermore, the organization has a very comprehensive 'Frequently Asked Questions' section. Astonishingly, in this section the organization provides their Tax Return forms available for download. By doing this the organization explains how they are “taking a lead in the Iranian-American community to spread a culture of transparency.” This is fundamental in supporting other diaspora organizations in become equally transparent and breaking images of competition among various organizations. Being able to view the Tax Return forms assuages the reluctance of individuals who are hesitated to get involved due to not knowing who funds and supports the organization.

It also becomes evident in this Frequently Asked Questions section that NIAC is attempting to annihilate any fears that the organization is a lobby for the government of Iran. They continue to provide clarity on this issue and others in the 'Myth vs. Fact' section, where they dismantle various false claims pertaining to the organization.

It is evident that the organization is aware of the significance of transparency. They emphasize this by claiming transparency as one of their four core values. NIAC states, “we are transparent in sharing objectives, sources of funding and positions on issues that count.” Again, this degree of transparency bolsters their ability to be engaged by other influential institutions and organizations involved in the affairs of Iran and the United States.

Inclusiveness

As mentioned earlier, simply from the fact that two of the seven Staff members are non-Iranians, you can quickly see a degree of inclusivity in the organization. This organization is a non-profit 501(c)(3), thus legally unable to take on religious or political affiliations. They state they are “not aligned with any government, any political party or political personality.” Through a review of the literature, it became very apparent that a principle fear in engaging diaspora organizations for peace-building efforts is that there is a high likelihood that these organizations are biased towards their own families, religious and/or ethnic groups (Horst et al., 2010). For this reason, it is significant to understand the inclusiveness of diaspora organizations.

NIAC does not make any divisions of religion. It seems as though the mention of religion and religious divisions have purposefully been excluded from the organization’s mission, focus and essentially their entire website. However, the organization does affirm the universality of human rights and supports these rights as delineated in the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Thus it can be determined that the organization is open to people from all religious beliefs and ethnic identities.

The only requirement to become a member of this organization is a tax-deductible fee. The organization offers various forms of membership at different price increments. The standard membership fee is \$25 a year for students and \$50 for non-students. Other than a monetary fee, this organization is open to people from all different communities, religious and political backgrounds, and regions.

Fear of favoritism and nepotism, which has been historically rampant amongst traditional Iranians, drawing suspicion to any new organization, is being eradicated by the claims and actions of NIAC. There authentically seems to be no screening process that allows only certain individuals membership and access to information, while excluding others. Additionally, most of the information and resources provided on the organization's website is open to everyone and there is no membership requirement. This is very important in assuaging the existing fear that diaspora organizations can play a large role in accentuating divisions within the diaspora and within the homeland.

Accountability

It is important to understand whether NIAC can be held accountable in continuing their efforts. There are several ways we can evaluate this criterion. Since the organization has provided their Tax Return forms from 2002 – 2011, we can examine the organization's ongoing financial transactions. Similarly, we can look at their various events and accomplishments to understand their commitment, and whether or not it is consistent and continuous.

By looking at the organization's Tax Return form it was evident that since 2002 the organization has significantly grown financially. In 2002, NIAC total revenue was

\$77,351, and they were able to raise \$49,580 of that revenue through contributions and grants. However, nine years later in 2011, the organization's total annual revenue was 716, 535. Additionally, in 2011 NIAC was able to raise \$684,453 of that revenue through grants and contributions. Although, the Tax Return forms do show a financial drop from 2010 to 2011, the overall financial trend of the organization has been growth.

Additionally, it is important to see that the organization is continuing to grow backed by financial data. The organization's events and engagement strategies will be comprehensively analyzed further on in this section. However, in order to portray the continuity of their efforts, I will provide a brief timeline of several of the organization's highlighted efforts since their inception.

Table 1: Timeline of Select NIAC Efforts and Achievements

Timeline of Select NIAC efforts and Achievements	2003 – Eliminated discrimination on Monster.com towards Iranians
	2004 – Successfully demanded and received an apology from MSNBC radio show host for offensive remarks to the Iranian American community
	2004 – Successfully corrected the National Geographic in their used of the term “Arabia Gulf” instead of historically recognizing “Persian Gulf”
	2007 – Successfully influenced director of a Hollywood picture to remove inflammatory and offensive scenes incorrectly portraying Iranian Americans
	2008 – Along side other NGOs, successfully influenced Democratic leadership to pull H.CON.RES 362, a blockade resolution against Iran
	2009 – Led a successful campaign to get FOX to apologized for derogatory remarks about Iranian American NBA basketball player, Hamed Haddadi
	2009 – Supported the Iran Digital Empowerment Act
	2010 – Active in blocking House Resolution 1553 condoning Israeli strike on Iran
	2010 – In collective diaspora organization efforts called for the suspension of an insulting AVN ad
	2011 - Played a lead role in the campaign to establish an independent UN human rights monitor on Iran
	2011 - Led the campaign to change the Single-Entry Visa Policy for students
	2012 - Along side other organizations, called for numerous tech companies to stop blocking Iranian people from Internet communication tools

The timeline represents a handful of the organization’s efforts and achievements as delineated on their website. In addition to portraying these efforts on NIAC’s website, many of these efforts and accomplishments contained links to prominent newspapers and organizations that paralleled their sentiments and information. These links include but are not limited to: The Washington Times, America.gov Website, Yahoo News, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, CNN, and BBC, and many other prominent media. The fact that there are other sources acknowledging the organization’s efforts is

significant, for it reinforces and strengthens the fact that the organization is indeed accountable and maintains sustained efforts.

Cooperation with Institutions and Individuals in the Country of Residence

Throughout the overview of existing literature, it became increasingly evident that in order for a diaspora to be influential in their host country, they must be well integrated and networked. Thus we must evaluate how active and connected NIAC is with various American institutions, and other actors in American civil society. This will be done primarily through analyzing their events to see whom the organization is networked with, and has connections to.

On the front-page of the organization's website there is an announcement of their upcoming Leadership Conference on Capitol Hill. The intention of NIAC's conference is to "examine the most significant and timely issues facing the U.S. and Iran." The organization will "bring together the world's foremost experts on Iranian politics, human rights, U.S.-Iran relations, and nuclear weapons to answer the toughest questions that policy makers wrestle with everyday." By examining the speakers and experts whom were brought to participate in NIAC's past conferences, we can develop awareness of how well this organization is connected to, and cooperates with, other institutions and individuals in the United States.

NIAC's website contains a large amount of information on their various conferences. This information includes transcripts, panel videos, panel briefings and summaries, and links to media coverage, for numerous conferences dating back to March of 2007. Seemingly, the organization has been able to network with and recruit a wide

variety of key players to come support and take lead roles in their events. *Table 3* will delineate merely three of the numerous events and influential speakers the organization has had. The three events selected for this chart are NIAC’s most recent events.

Additionally *Table 2* will depict various House Representatives and Senators whom have made remarks at NIAC events.

Since this section is solely to examine how NIAC is in cooperation with American institutions and individuals, I will be excluding the other diaspora members and organizations that were present at these various events. However, diaspora individuals will be mentioned if they are representative of American civil society organization or institution that is clearly not a diaspora organization. NIAC’s connection between diaspora organizations and individuals will be examined in the next section.

Table 2: Depicts the House Representatives and Senators whom have made remarks at the corresponding NIAC event

Congressional Remarks	NIAC Event
Rep. Keith Ellison (D-MN)	<i>Answering the Iranian People’s Call for Human Rights</i> March 15, 2011
Rep. Anna Eshoo (D-CA) Rep. Keith Ellison (D-MN)	<i>Iran at a Crossroads: Assessing a Changing Landscape</i> March 10, 2010
Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-NY) Rep. John Tierney (D-MA)	<i>The US & Iran: Between Elections and Enrichment</i> June 17, 2009
Senator Thomas Carper (D-DE) Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA) Rep. John Tierney (D-MA)	<i>Can Obama Untangle the Iranian Challenge? Prospects for a New Iran Policy</i> November 18, 2008

Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA)	<i>Breaking the US-Iran Stalemate</i> April 8, 2008
Rep. Jim Moran (D-VA)	<i>Human Rights In Iran and U.S.</i> <i>Policy Options</i> July 26, 2007
Rep. Mike Honda (D-CA)	
Rep. Tom Tancredo (R-CO)	<i>US-Iran Relations: Collision, Stand-off, or Convergence?</i> March 27, 2007
Rep. Jane Harman (D-CA)	

Table 3: Various speakers at NIAC events, depicting collaboration and support from Individuals and Organizations within American civil society and institution

2012 Leadership Conference September 30 - October 2	
Eric Ferrari	<i>Washington Based Sanctions Attorney and Expert</i>
Justin Logan	<i>Director of Foreign Policy Studies at the Cato Institute</i>
Sanam Anderlini	<i>International Civil Society Action Network</i>
Honorable Robert Hunter	<i>Former US Ambassador to NATO</i>
Honorable Thomas Pickering	<i>Former Ambassador to Israel and Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs</i>
Tom Dine	<i>Executive Director of the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee</i>
James Zogby	<i>President of the Arab American Institute</i>
Aram Suren Hamparian	<i>Executive Director of the Armenian National Committee of America</i>

**The Day After Baghdad: Assessing the Iran Nuclear Talks
May 23, 2012**

PJ Crowley	<i>Former Assistant Secretary of State</i>
Aaron David Miller	<i>Distinguished Scholar at Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars</i>
George Perkovich	<i>Director of the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace</i>

**The Iranian Nuclear Dilemma: Risk of an Iraq Sequel?
February 21, 2012**

Hans Blix	<i>Former Director General of the IAEA</i>
Colin Kahl	<i>Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East</i>
Robert Kelley	<i>Former Chief Inspector for the IAEA in Iraq</i>

It is evident by the diversity and influence of the various speakers at NAIC's events, that this organization has placed tremendous effort into collaborating with numerous individuals, organizations and institutions in the United States. NIAC has shown considerable capability in their efforts to build a strong network within American civil society. By examining these speakers, it is evident that NIAC has networked with governmental institutions, international agencies, various NGO's, as well as other diaspora organizations. This ability accentuates the organization's goal of being that bridge between the Iranian people and American society.

Cooperation within diaspora and transnational ties

The strength of a diaspora is increased tremendously when it is able to develop a unified voice. Although the Iranian American diaspora is extremely heterogeneous in nature, there appears to be many instances when the diaspora has unified and mobilized to confront common goals. In order to provide an analysis and evaluate NIAC's cooperation within the diaspora and the organization's transnational ties, we will begin by examining instances where Iranian diaspora individuals and groups, including NIAC, came together. We will then survey the various Iranian speakers and representatives of other Iranian diaspora organizations, who have participated in NIAC events. Finally, we will investigate and evaluate the organization's transnational ties and their connectedness across borders.

Humanitarian Aid

In recent years, Iran has unfortunately faced several devastating and destructive earthquakes. In the wake of these situations the Iranian American diaspora has been able to quickly mobilize efforts to send humanitarian aid to Iran. Due to the tense situation between Iran and the United State, there have often been sanctions in place that limit the diasporas ability to send various forms of humanitarian aid to the victims of these horrible disasters. During these times, numerous diaspora individuals and organizations have come together to petition government officials and agencies to allow humanitarian aid to be sent to Iran.

On August 13, 2012, various Iranian organizations signed on to a letter sent to Adam Szubin, the Director of the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) at the U.S. Department of Treasury. The letter “urged OFAC to take immediate action to enable humanitarian assistance for the victims of the recent earthquakes in Northwestern Iran and specifically noted that the current sanctions against Iran limit individual and organizational ability to provide medicine, food, supplies, and monetary assistance to these victims as they begin to rebuild their lives” (NIAC). The signatories of this letter included: the Iranian American Bar Association, Child Foundation, Children of Persia, Havaar-Iranian Initiative Against War, Sanctions, and State Repression, Iranian Alliances Across Borders (IAAB), Moms Against Poverty, National Iranian American Council (NIAC), Pars Equality Center and Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA).

On August 30, 2012, the same organizations sent a letter to President Barack Obama thanking him for suspending sanctions that limited humanitarian relief efforts. The President was further influenced by thousands of other Americans (including Iranian Americans) and fourteen members of Congress, urging him to take this action. The unity and collective encouragement of various diaspora organizations is noticeable and pivotal in cultivating a more prominent and influential Iranian American voice.

Similarly, on April 9, 2013 a magnitude 6.3 earthquake struck Bushehr, Iran. Within two days, these same Iranian organizations, alongside various human rights and humanitarian organizations sent a coalition letter to Obama urging him not to allow sanctions to restrict humanitarian aid. Although these various diaspora organizations have

very dissimilar and distinct missions and members, they are clearly able to come together and unite when confronted with issues that are relevant to the entire community.

Consensus Coalition

The 2010 U.S. Census Bureau accommodated the opportunity for many Iranian organizations to cooperate together. On NIAC's website, the importance of the Census is explained. The organization states that the "Census data plays a critical role in determining how the government funds social services and community programs. It even helps determine the political clout of minority communities." Thus there was a large effort by NIAC alongside numerous other Iranian diaspora organizations to get the Iranian community represented with higher actual numbers.

NIAC was part of the *Iranians Count 2010 Census Coalition (ICCC)*, which consisted of numerous Iranian organizations representing all 50 states. The ICCC consisted of both small local Iranian organizations, as well as larger national organizations such as NIAC, IAAB and PAAIA. The united purpose was to encourage Iranians living in the United States to participate in the Census. This effort was successful in bringing together various organizations that traditionally have different members and focuses. Again this exemplifies that although Iranian Americans may constitute a very heterogeneous community, they can and will come together in the name of a common goal.

NIAC Conferences

In addition to cooperating with experts from various American organizations and institutions, NIAC seemingly also engages and hosts a number of prominent Iranian Americans experts and organizations at their events. Just as was done when evaluating the organization’s cooperation with individuals and institutions in the US, we will look at NIAC’s recent events to further determine cooperation within the diaspora.

Table 4: Iranian American diaspora speakers at NIAC events

2012 Leadership Conference September 30 - October 2	
Maziar Bahari	<i>Journalist and Filmmaker</i>
Nazila Fathi	<i>Former Tehran-based Journalist for the NY Times</i>
Ramin Jahenbegloo	<i>University of Toronto Professor, Author, Prominent Iran Scholar</i>
Bijan Khajehpour	<i>Political and Economic Analyst and Chairman of Atieh International</i>
2011 Leadership Conference October 2 – 4	
Ramin Asgard	<i>VOA Persian News Network Director</i>
Rouzbeh Parsi	<i>European Union Institute for Security Studies</i>
Darius Shahinfar	<i>Former Congressional Candidate</i>

Several other Speakers from Past Events

Dr. Hadi Ghaemi	<i>International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran</i>
Nazila Fathi	<i>Former Iran-Based New York Times correspondent and Fellow at the Nieman Foundation</i>
Prof. Nader Hashemi	<i>Assistant Professor and Director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies</i>
Alireza Nader	<i>RAND International Policy Analyst</i>

The assortments of Iranian individuals who have spoken at NIAC's events are noticeably diverse and the topics cover a large number of relevant issues effecting local and international causes. Although there are a lot of Iranian speakers at the organization's events, it is interesting to note that most of the speakers are indeed non-Iranians. This is likely due to the fact that the organization is attempting to draw influential and key players in the American political system. However, it can be seen that NIAC does engage their own diaspora and provides leadership positions within the organization's events and leadership structure.

Promoting other Iranian Diaspora Organizations

NIAC has also taken an active role in promoting various efforts and initiatives of other diaspora organizations. The organization has posted numerous articles encouraging participation of the diaspora in the events and conferences of other organizations. For example, both in 2004 and 2009, NIAC provided comprehensive information on IAAB's Conference on the Iranian Diaspora. In 2009, NIAC additionally was a sponsor of

IAAB's conference. Similarly, in 2012 and 2013, NIAC publicized information regarding IAAB Summer Leadership Institute. There is also a direct link from NIAC's website to IAAB's website. This exemplifies the degree of camaraderie and connectedness between these two distinctly-focused Iranian diaspora organizations.

NIAC has also applauded the efforts, while also utilizing the resources and publications, of PAAIA. In 2008, the organization issued a press release welcoming PAAIA as the first Iranian Americana lobbying organization in the nation's capital. In addition, these two organizations, alongside the Asian Law Caucus and the Iranian American Bar Association, have recently worked together to release a report analyzing and exposing the impact of sanctions on Iranian Americans.

It is evident that there is a degree of interconnectedness and cooperation within the diaspora. As exemplified on numerous occasions, many Iranian diaspora organizations have been able to come together in a united effort to attain a common goal. As more Iranian diaspora individuals become involved in these organizations, and as these organizations continue their trend of growth, the influence and potentials of the diaspora will accumulate. This will assist in developing a louder voice for a community that for over the past three decades (since the Iranian hostage crisis in 1980), has been faced with continuous discrimination, bigotry, and up until recently have been essentially voiceless in American civil society.

Transnational Ties

It has been stated that "transnational networks are of great value in that they allow diaspora members in different countries of settlement to draw on resources available in

these different places” (Horst et al., 2010, p. 17). Thus it is essential to understand the ties between diaspora organizations and their homeland, as well as ties between diaspora organizations settled in different host lands. Unfortunately, due to the current tensions between the governments of Iran and the United States, transnational activities between the diaspora and their homeland have been limited.

Due to Iran’s history with external influence, including the overthrow of the democratically elected Prime Minister in 1953, there is a heightened degree of mistrust of the initiatives of external actors in Iran. However, the NIAC website does briefly indicate that prior to the establishment of the 2006 Bush Administration sponsored Democracy Fund, they were able to organize “nonpolitical trainings for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Iran to help foster a stronger Iranian civil society.” Unfortunately, after the establishment of the 2006 Democracy Fund, which was intentioned to support NGOs in Iran to spread democracy, the Islamic Republic became extremely suspicious of all NGO efforts. Additionally, the Administration was particularly taciturn in revealing who were the recipients of the Democracy Fund, a fund that originally began with a \$25 million budget. Thus, the Islamic Republic cracked down on numerous NGOs in Iran, to the extent that a number of both Iranian-Americans and Iranians were detained.

However, in efforts to eliminate the Democracy Fund so that both external and internal NGOs could continue their work without fear of governmental repercussions in Iran, there was a degree of transnational cooperation. Numerous Iranian activists residing in Iran sent a letter to the Administration requesting the annulment of the Democracy

Fund. Their letter was highlighted and published by NIAC. Although there seems to be a degree of connectedness between the diaspora and the homeland, this primarily seems to be between individuals, or NIAC and individuals in Iran, not organizations.

There is no detailed and emphasized mention on NIAC's website of current efforts with organizations and institutions in Iran. Similarly, there is no mention of cooperation with diaspora organization in other countries. The lack of cooperation between NIAC and organizations within Iran is understandable due to the current political climate. However, the efforts of the organization, primarily their focus on human rights and democracy, could benefit from transnational cooperation with other Iranian diaspora organizations. Of the criterion we have evaluated thus far, this one is the most lacking.

It has been articulated that diaspora organizations become more effective in the pursuit of their goals when they are connected transnationally. NIAC's interest and focus on human rights and democracy in Iran, coincides with the desires that many U.S. institutions and organizations have for Iran. Thus it may be beneficial for affluent organizations, individuals and institutions to support NIAC in building transnational ties.

Perception on Peace and Conflict

The criterion delineated by DIAPEACE emphasized that the organization must be able to understand the various shifts and changes that may occur in areas of conflict. In order to gauge this, I will be examining the expertise and qualifications of the organization's principle staff members to determine if their approach and understanding of the conflict takes into account all aspects.

With a glance at the biography of NIAC's president, Trita Parsi, it immediately becomes evident that the organization was founded on a strong pillar. Parsi has held numerous influential and esteemed positions where he provided guidance and knowledge to international agencies, as well as, Western and Asian governments. His bio states that he "has worked for the Swedish Permanent Mission to the UN, where he served in the Security Council, handling the affairs of Afghanistan, Iraq, Tajikistan and Western Sahara, and in the General Assembly's Third Committee, addressing human rights in Iran, Afghanistan, Myanmar and Iraq." It is evident that this individual has had tremendous field experience in significant arenas. As far as educational experience, Parsi received his PhD from John Hopkins School for International Studies, in addition to two masters degrees, one in International Relations from Uppsala University and another Master's Degree in Economics from the Stockholm School of Economics. Based on his education and experience, it can be determined that Parsi is highly qualified and able to accurately follow the ever-changing dynamics in the U.S.-Iran conflict.

Another face of the organization is their Policy Director, Jamal Abdi. Abdi became a part of the organization's leadership team in 2009. Abdi came to NIAC following his position on Capitol Hill as Policy Advisor to Representative Brian Baird (D-WA). Similar to Parsi, Abdi studied International Relations and Political Science. However, after receiving his undergraduate degree he pursued fieldwork instead of continuing his education.

Both Parsi and Abdi have written for numerous prominent newspapers; including but not limited to: the New York Times, The Huffington Post, Wall Street Journal, Los

Angeles Times, CNN, and The Hill. NIAC's Research Director Reza Marashi shares a similar professional experience. Marashi spent "four years in the Office of Iranian Affairs at the U.S. Department of State. Prior to his tenure at the State Department, he was an analyst at the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) covering China-Middle East issues, and a Tehran-based private strategic consultant on Iranian political and economic risk."

The organization is clearly run by highly trained and qualified individuals. Thus it is extremely beneficial for the government and various key actors in U.S.-Iran affairs to continue to draw on NIAC's expertise. The organization's perception of peace and conflict undoubtedly coincides with commonly accepted Western democratic values and beliefs.

Engagement Strategies

Under this criterion, we will be exploring the various initiatives the organization takes in order to meet their mission. This would include NIAC's numerous campaigns, their promotion and use of media outlets, their events and several other resource's provided on their website. I will begin this section by examining the NIAC Campaigns, before moving on to an examination of their publications, interviews, events and other online recourses.

NIAC Campaigns

There are 24 current campaigns on NIAC's website. Each campaign has its own page, which contains a short but concise description of the issue at hand. Additionally,

underneath the description is a scripted letter to send to the relevant representative. The particular recipient of the letter is dependent on the campaign. Additionally, there is the option to put in your information and send the letter directly from the NIAC website. This structure facilitates the process of connecting you to your correct representative seamlessly. The process has also facilitated the sending of thousands of letters for the numerous campaigns. Several of NIAC’s achievements, as listed on the timeline above, can be partially attributed to the success of their campaigns, and their ability to get individuals to visit their website and send these letters. *Table 5* portrays the titles of seven of NIAC’s most recent campaigns.

Table 5: Depicts NIAC’s Recent Campaigns and the Respective Contact Person

Current NIAC Campaign	Letter Recipient
Seize the Moment for Peace and Human Rights	President Obama
Stop Rep. Rohrabacher's Push to Divide Iran Along Ethnic Lines	Your House Representative
Tell Obama to Lift Sanctions on Communications Tools	President Obama
Free Nasrin Sotoudeh & Iranian Political Prisoners	Your House Representative
Hold your Representative Accountable on Iran Diplomacy	Your House Representative
Iran Fact Check: Revoke Netanyahu's Free Pass to Sell War	Betsy Fischer and David Gregory <i>Meet the Press</i> Executive Director and Host
Tell Apple's CEO to Stop Discriminating Against Iranian Americans	Tim Cook, Apple CEO

Each of these campaigns has a scripted letter, which entails quantifiable actions that the respective recipient can take. For example, the most recent campaign in which NIAC is engaging Congress is the *Stop Rep. Rohrabacher's Push to Divide Iran Along Ethnic Lines* campaign. Figure 1 entails the content of this letter, along with portraying the way the website is designed to assuage the process of contacting various representatives.

Contact

- Required fields
- Title:
- First Name:
- Last Name:
- Your Email:
- Address 1:
- Address 2:
- City:
- State / Province:
- ZIP / Postal Code:
- Phone Number:

Remember me. [What's this?](#)

Message

- Subject:

Dear [Recipient's Name]

- Personalize your message

I am writing to urge you to oppose H.RES.183 and Congressman Rohrabacher's radical agenda of trying to stoke ethnic tensions in the Middle East. From Iraq to Rwanda, Yugoslavia to Darfur, the world has seen what happens when neighbors are turned against one another based on ethnic divisions. Congressman Rohrabacher's proposal for the United States to exploit ethnic divisions and the evils they sow is unconscionable. I urge you to oppose H.RES.183 and to actively speak out against this dangerous idea.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]
[Your Address]
[City, State ZIP]

Figure 1: Campaign Letter to Congress Representative

Although the NIAC website does not continuously reveal the number of letters sent through their efforts, there has been mention in some cases. For example, in regards to The Stop Terrorists Entry Program (STEP), NIAC claims to have delivered over 5,000

letters in opposition of this legislation. Additionally, the NIAC states that hours after they delivered the letters, the spokesperson of Congressman Gresham Barrett, the congressman who introduced the letter, “announced that the most controversial provision, which would have forced the deportation of nonimmigrant visa holders living in the U.S., would not be included in the revised legislation.”

NIAC’s campaigns have been a key component in their objective of getting the Iranian American voice heard. This engagement strategy is a common one among interest groups in the United States. IAPAC has a very parallel strategy in getting individuals to contact their representatives with a pre-scripted email. Additionally, Iran is one of AIPAC’s top issues. AIPAC, the pro-Israeli activities lobby group has tremendously opposing positions to that of NIAC’s. Thus there is tremendous encouragement on behalf of AIPAC to support and pressure congress into supporting the various resolutions and legislations that NIAC is simultaneously trying to oppose. An in-depth exploration of this dynamic would be enlightening to explore; however this unfortunately does go beyond the scope of this current research. Regardless, it is evident that this campaign engagement strategy is a common and effective one.

Media

In addition to contacting representatives and key influential individuals, a large part of NIAC’s engagement strategy is advocacy among the general public. This is primarily done through their continued effort of spreading and providing knowledge in order to “enable civic participation and informed decision making.” As previously

mentioned, NIAC's staff is unceasingly writing for various publications, as well as for the organization's own blog site and the publication of their own press releases.

Media and advocacy is highly important in shaping the perceptions of civil society. As explained in the explored literature, diaspora organizations that are able to appeal to the symbols of democracy and "oppositionless issues" are more likely to be successful in their efforts. A recently published NIAC video supporting their *Seize the Moment Campaign*, urging individuals to get involved in pushing their member of congress to support diplomacy with Iran. With strong emotional appeal, the video uses several "oppositionless issues" and symbols of democracy to relay their message.

The video commences with a mention of how 18 million Iranians have casted their votes towards moderations, and have rejected radicalism. However, it continues to state that there are still radicals outside of Iran pushing towards harsher sanctions and conflict. The video claims that these radical individuals "wish to crush the dreams of peace with ever increasing sanctions." Additionally, the video ends with the statement "Take a stand! Tell your member of congress to support diplomacy and oppose conflict." The rhetoric presented in this video is predominantly in favor of diplomacy, democracy, peace and non-violence. These values are commonly accepted American values, which make opposing this video further challenging.

The organization has also participated in video interviews with numerous news organizations, including Al-Jazeera and CNN. A highlighted interview on the NIAC website, is Parsi's interview by Jon Stewart in 2012 on the Daily Show. This satirical show attempted to highlight the various opportunities that the U.S. government has

ignorantly missed with Iran. Parsi was brought to the show to talk about his book *A Single Role of the Die*. He was able to present numerous little-known elements and opportunities that had been alive in US-Iran affairs. The mere fact that the organization's President was able speak on such a highly viewed show indicates the strength and increasing influence of NIAC. Parsi's expertise and role exemplifies the following statement: "diasporas are invaluable information sources to Western agencies as they often provide up-to-date information on the human rights and conflict situations" (Prikkalainen, Paivi, Adbile, Mahdi, p. 34).

Providing Resources

The organization provides numerous resources on their website for many diversely-interested individuals. As mentioned several times, the organization provides bountiful amounts of information on U.S.-Iran affairs. This information is a resource for Iranians and Iranian Americans who may be directly affected by the shifts that occur within US-Iran relations. Similarly, NIAC is an information resource for the American public who can become more familiar with U.S.-Iran relations. NIAC is able to offer insights on both the American and Iranian positions, going beyond the sterile sound bites to effectively portraying the logic and reasoning behind the various positions. This is beneficial to support the dismantling of fears that Iran is a completely irrational actor that can only be dealt with by force.

In addition to NIAC providing up-to-date and insightful information of US-Iran affairs, NIAC has also collaborated with another organization: Just Foreign Policy, to develop a website entitle *Iran Media Fact Check*. The purpose of this website is to

“ensure that politicians and the media do not repeat the same mistakes that were made in the run-up to the Iraq war by exposing false claims that are made by politicians and perpetuated by the media.”

One example of the efforts of *Iran Media Fact Check* can be seen after Reuters posted two articles in December 2012. As the website explains, one Reuters article claimed, “Washington says Tehran is enriching uranium to levels that could be used in nuclear weapons.” A second article stated; “The West suspects Iran is enriching uranium to levels that could be used in weapons...” Both of these statements can be used to perpetuate the fear that Iran is on its way to develop nuclear weapons and as such should be dreaded. However, U.S. intelligence has expressed several times this year that Iran has not begun to build nuclear weapons, and has not surpassed the 20% nuclear enrichment level (NIAC). While the Iran Media Fact Check website exposed this media inaccuracy, NIAC was able to get Reuters to correct the inaccurate information they provided.

The organization also has an Anti-Discrimination Center on their website. The Anti-Discrimination Center provides an overview of the various types of discrimination, so Iranian Americans can become knowledgeable on this issue and realize if they are being discriminated against. NIAC mentions that this initiative began when they became aware of the increased discrimination against Iranian Americans post 9/11.

Under this section, NIAC delineates what actions an individual can take if they find themselves a victim of discrimination. Numerous links to organizations – governmental and non-governmental – that fight against discrimination are provided. Additionally, links to different lawyers and law organizations are provided. One of these

organizations is the Iranian American Bar Association, which furthermore portrays cooperation within the diaspora. This area on the NIAC website may prove to be very valuable for individuals who have faced this type of discrimination and are unsure of their rights and what to do.

The organization additionally provides numerous resources for students. The website contains a Student Visa Help Center, which supplies basic information for Iranians who are trying to come to the United States to attend school. Again, NIAC provides several links that can help a prospective student through their application process. Furthermore, information is provided for Iranian-Americans who are trying to help their family members with the Visa process. Although, the organization does not provide specific advice on individual cases, they are helpful in the fact that they provide a solid direction and a bulk of information that can be supportive and beneficial.

Additionally, there is a section that lists numerous scholarship opportunities for Iranian Americans. This type of data bank can be extremely beneficial for students who need financial support for their education. Due to increased sanctions, the Iranian currency has plummeted significantly since the inception of new sanctions. This has made it increasingly difficult for Iranian students to support themselves, in as much as they were reliant on funds to arrive from their sources in Iran. Having a data bank that provides information on various scholarship opportunities can support in assuaging the stress and fear of not knowing how to pay for education and/or finding additional support.

NIAC also provides information on various internships and fellowships for students interested in U.S.-Iran relations and the U.S. political system, may apply to. All these resources for students constitute a fairly comprehensive data bank, where students or potential students can draw information. However, there is no message board or Internet space provided by NIAC that would enable the diaspora to engage in dialogue about various recourses and relevant issues. This may be due to not wanting to bring about any cyber conflicts and exacerbate divisions. However, if this open Internet space was monitored to only contain useful and relevant information, it may be very beneficial. I would imagine that in this space, Iranian Americans would be able to post their own skills and expertise that they are open to volunteer, in support of the diaspora. Such mediums of communication could support the student, new immigrant and low-income communities and generate a higher degree of participation and well-meaning exchanges amongst the diaspora community members.

Events

NIAC also hosts numerous events dedicated to building and advancing the interests of the Iranian American community. Their most distinguished events are their various conferences, which have already been discussed. Their current largest and most continuous event is the annual Leadership Conference that has been held in the fall for the past two years, and will be held again in October of 2013. In addition to these events, the organization hosts smaller workshops and meetings to bring local communities together.

A recent local event NIAC organized in Washington D.C. was a community organizing training event. The core questions of this event were “What does it mean to build a sustainable grassroots political influence? How can Iranian Americans channel their personal and professional talents into becoming more effective in public life?” NIAC’s Community Outreach Director Yasmin Radjy was the head of this particular event. These local events are organized primarily by NIAC Ambassadors, who are volunteer individuals encouraging and developing the organization in various cities throughout the United States.

NIAC Ambassadors also host other small events to bring the community together, such as movie nights and Happy Hours. In addition to training the diaspora, these events also have the purpose of building larger membership and getting Iranian Americans more involved in the efforts of the organization. Recently, NIAC has also reached out to various Iranian student organizations on campuses across the United States to get them more involved in the organization’s efforts.

This effort to build local communities is a recent and developing NIAC effort. The organization has done good work in the legislative arena. While the organization has a large membership pool, these individuals are primarily cyber members who sign letters individually online or support the organization financially. Other than the various conferences that these individuals may attend, there has been little effort to build a true community. Thus far the organization has been successful in building what Benedict Andersons has termed an *imagined community*. Andersons claims “it is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members,

meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” (Anderson, 2006, p. 6) These imagined communities often form out of national identities, and can be mobilized towards common goals. Although, there is the potential for great power and influence in imagined communities, it is also highly beneficial to strive towards building personal relationships and building a true community within an imagined community.

Thus far, most of NIAC’s initiatives and events are primarily politically focused. If there was an additional focus on building and empowering individual community members, in a non-political fashion, the potential to draw in a more diverse group of individuals increases. This will be discussed further in the conclusion section of this paper. However, I will conclude this section by stating that NIAC does indeed have numerous positive and beneficial engagement strategies that fit both their mission of getting Iranian Americans active in civil life and also acting as a bridge between two communities.

Sustainability of the organization

The sustainability of NIAC can be analyzed in a similar way to how the organization’s accountability was analyzed. Often diaspora organizations struggle with funding and maintaining committed leaders. Again, by looking at the organization’s tax returns, it is evident that the organization has been financially growing. Additionally, a recent newsletter of the organization stated that their goal for fundraising in July 2013 was to raise \$100,000. The newsletter stated that thus far, with a few days left till the end

of July, they had reached \$87,000 and urged more donations. This is close to their financial goals of stability and an achievement towards sustainability.

Also, although Parsi has been a core leader of the organization since its 2002 inception, many new highly-active individuals have been added to the leadership teams. The growth of the leadership team, as well as the impressive qualifications of the new team members, also signifies the organization's sustainability and growth. Similarly, the organization is highly active in constantly updating their website and releasing news updates and articles. Furthermore, the organization has an internship program where they are able to offer students active roles within the organization, and in return provide college credit.

There is essentially no indication that the organization is faced with issues regarding their sustainability. All of the staff is visibly very active, and it does not seem as though the efforts of the organization revolves primarily around one individual. Additionally, there seems to be an increase in the organization's events and efforts, which also indicates their prolonged sustainability.

Concluding Remarks

Overall NIAC was able to aptly satisfy a majority of the criterion. The criteria provided by DIAPEACE, represent universal values and principles of democratic communities and evolved healthy social organisms. Highly notable in this analysis is the organization's dedication to building influential relationships with relevant and powerful actors within American civil society. The organization's ability to consistently bring

prominent speakers and actors to their events is admirable and indicates their continued commitment. The fact that the organization is insistent on spreading beyond the influential and prominent players within their own diaspora reveals an understanding of the importance of networking and building at grassroots level across communities.

NIAC has increasingly placed itself to fight for the Iranian American interest on Capitol Hill. The organization has had numerous achievements, which has facilitated their continued effort despite frequent resistance. Individuals such as the prominent political scientist, Samuel Huntington, “have recently warned against the narrow policy agenda of diasporas that promote the interests of people and entities outside the united states and undermine the nation’s “common good” (Shain & Barth, 2003, p. 454). Huntington clearly does not see the paramount potential of these organizations. These types of organizations are a vital part of American pluralism and homogeneity. The United States is a melting pot of countless ethnicities and nationalities, and it is pivotal that these individuals are heard and participate in American civil society. Additionally, the engagement of diasporas can significantly facilitate a greater understanding of the positions and happening of the diaspora’s homeland.

NIAC, as an Iranian American organization, is a hybrid-identity organization. The majority of members and leaders of this organization are products of both Iran and the United States. Their interest lies in what is authentically the best and serves both of their national identities. Being a grassroots organization, NIAC is dedicated to advancing the interests of their members. Recently, the main focus of the organizations has been fighting broad sanctions. NIAC’s position on sanctions is as followed:

“NIAC opposes broad sanctions that hurt ordinary Iranians. NIAC supports targeted measures against human rights violators in Iran’s government. NIAC supports removing restrictions on Internet communication tools, humanitarian relief, and human rights and civil society organizations.”

Unlike Huntington’s statement, this organization is concerned with both the “common good” of the United States as well as the interest of the Iranian people. In many of their publications, NIAC explains how broad sanctions that hurt and limit the ordinary citizens of Iran, in fact play a role in strengthening the Islamic Regime, which is not in American interest. The information and insight NIAC is able to offer can be beneficial to both communities.

The fact that NIAC aptly fits the engagement criterion further exemplifies the fact that they are a highly conscious organization that should be additionally engaged with by larger institutions and agencies. Additionally, DIAPEACE emphasizes the fact that an organization’s transparency and accountability should be highly considered. NIAC was particularly strong in regards to these two criteria, and has even set a positive example in being the most noticeably transparent amongst other Iranian American diaspora organizations. Through this analysis, it is evident that NIAC has a significant potential to engage constructively in peace building efforts between Iran and the United States, in as much as it embraces the principles and values of transparency, accountability and unity. Its leadership is educated and familiar with Western guidelines. NIAC basis their strategies and actions on data and facts rather than beliefs and preset positioning. It has established a high level of local and international networking and positioned itself to

focus further on community building and accessing on the ground communities, within host and home countries.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Research and Results Summary

Diaspora organizations and their role in conflict resolution and peace making have increasingly become an area of study. A divergent set of views and conclusions as to the role and effectiveness of diasporas and their potential has developed; with a serious debate on whether diaspora individuals and organizations play more of constructive role or a destructive role in conflict resolutions. Many scholars have provided research and have argued for the two distinct sides of this debate. However, the conclusions have and continue to vary. Thus, I argue that instead of generalized debate on the potential influences of a diaspora, it is paramount to look at specific diasporas and diaspora organizations, within the context of democratic values and principals, to understand their influence and position.

In a time of heightened and continuously fluctuating tensions between the United States and Iran, it is beneficial to see how the hybrid-identified diaspora, with a growing population of well-educated and informed membership can play a positive role in bridging the historical tensions between their two communities. In recent years, the relationship between the United States and Iran has not shifted in a positive direction. Talk of war with Iran is often floating around on Capitol Hill, with Israeli pressure towards war being stronger than ever before. The distrust between the United States and

Iran has caused both sides to miss opportunities and momentary openings for reconciliation and new relations. In this continued pattern of mistrust between the two parties and increased aggressive positioning, there has been little room for positive movement and understanding. While the governments of these conflicting sides are unable to effectively communicate, the role of the diaspora can be pivotal in providing insight for both communities.

The nature of the United States political system provides opportunities for groups to mobilize and become active in attempting to shape policy. With the heightened influence of the U.S. Congress, diaspora organizations, along with other grassroots and politically active organizations, have more of a potential to be effective in lobbying for their interests and raising awareness among policymakers. Understanding this dynamic in the United States, gives additional importance to the potential of diaspora organizations.

The combination of historic tensions between the United State and Iran, alongside the growing acknowledgment of the influence of diaspora organizations, particularly in the United States, justified examining the role of the prominent Iranian American organization, NIAC. This organization, which consists of highly educated, experienced, active, and mobilized Iranian Americans, has the potential to bring about new understandings within this historic conflict.

This hybrid-identified organization is able to comprehensively understand the positions of both of the conflicting sides. One of the highlighted accomplishments of this organization was when they were successful in leading the initiative to prevent House of Representative legislation calling for a naval blockade against Iran in 2010. Coincidentally,

a naval blockade is considered to be an act of war. This act would have caused tremendous regional and global instability, and additionally made it significantly easier for the Iranian Regime to further restrict the civil liberties of their citizens. In efforts to prevent war and support diplomacy, NIAC has continued to persuade and educate policymakers and the general public on Iran and the effective actions that should be taken.

NIAC was able to aptly satisfy all elements of the DIAPEACE criterion, which I consider to be the proper context for evaluating the intentions and health of a diaspora organization. This organization is clearly in a well-suited place to play an influential role in being the bridge between the United States and Iran. One of the principle limitations of NIAC is their lack of networking within, and ability to influence, the Islamic Regime. This to a large extent is due to the tense political climate within Iran and the Regime's distrust of external influence. Additionally, NIAC has often condemned the Regime's infringements on, and disregard for, human rights. However, with the recent election of moderate President Hassan Rouhani, engagement between the diaspora and Iran might become a possibility worth aiming for.

NIAC as an Iranian American diaspora organization showed no inclination of the limitations that often face conflict-generated diasporas. Conflict-generated diasporas have often been described as unable to play a constructive role in peace building due to their continued attachment to their grievances of leaving the homeland. Additionally, a large majority of Iranian diaspora is not faced with hardships of unemployment and lack of resources, common to immigrant populations. This particular diaspora is relatively

empowered and collectively surpass the average level of education in the United States. Thus their potential to act as a peace-builder is appropriately heightened.

NIAC in particular is a very politically centered organization. Their events are all highly politically focused. Historically, politics has been a central issue of division and hostility for Iranians. Thus the potential for resistance from diaspora individuals in regards to getting involved with such a politically active organization is high. NIAC's efforts and achievements are genuine. However, there are areas of further improvement and growth for the organization.

The organization is essentially reliant on an imagined community. There is minimal personal interaction between NIAC members. Although there is room for growth; through their Ambassadors Program, there have been recent efforts to bridge the organization with local communities. The events organized by these Ambassadors are additionally politically focused. Although this focus is important, it is likely to attract only a certain group of like-minded individuals. To further expand this organization and build a stronger grassroots constituency, I would suggest that NIAC begin to mobilize people not solely on their political interest and activity, but instead on their Iranian-American identity and their practical needs and aspirations.

By loosening this currently tight grip on immediately getting Iranian Americans politically active, the potential to grow their membership may increase. Shifting the focus slightly on diaspora empowerment, and introducing a focus on organizing non-political skill-building and empowerment workshops, may be highly beneficial. Workshops that Iranian Americans from all walks of life can participate in and personally benefit from.

The local community building efforts, can further attempt to establish links with on-the-ground sister communities at the home country, expanding the possibilities of communication and support between the two countries. This would attract a more diverse diaspora population, initiate positive people-to-people communication, and additionally greatly empower the participating individuals, which in turn empowers their respective communities. After building a non-political relationship with the organization, individuals who were initially hesitant about getting involved politically may now feel much more comfortable. Additionally, as the literature similarly showed, empowered diaspora communities are most effective in having an influential role in conflict resolution. This effort may be paramount in building a larger grassroots collective for NIAC.

Additionally through this analysis, it became evident how multifaceted the efforts of a diaspora and a diaspora organization can be. Similar to what was portrayed through the literature review, NIAC has been active through being a political advocate, sending remittance – both social and financial, providing data banks, and various other additional efforts. However, unlike common understandings of conflict-generated diaspora that were depicted in the literature, this diaspora organization did not seem to be attached to ideas of a non-existent home land. Additionally, there was no indication that this diaspora organization could potentially play the role of a spoiler or cause further protraction within the conflict.

Limitations

It is important to understand the limitations of this study. Understanding the role of the Iranian American community in acting as a peace-builder and bridge between the United States and Iran is a relatively underexplored area. There is currently little scholarship on the efforts of the Iranian American diaspora and even less scholarship on their diaspora organizations. Thus this study has just begun to uncover the potential influence and dynamics of Iranian American diaspora organizations. There is still a significant amount left to explore within this diaspora and their various organizations. I am hopeful that more effort in studying this diaspora will be actualized in the future, with a particular attention to the two communities' historical conflict. The stalemate in the current U.S.- Iran relations brings us to the hope that perhaps by further opening this door, solutions and ideas to resolve this historic conflict can be found.

Additionally, due to time limitations, it was not possible to conduct in-depth interviews. This study could have significantly benefited from interviews with various persons, including but not limited to, the leaders of NIAC, members of the organization, individuals familiar with the organizations, and policymakers who are both in contact or know of the organization. Through more in-depth analysis, a more comprehensive understanding of the organization's influence and political power could be explored and presented.

The data for this study was primarily gathered through online resources and through examining the organization's website and publications. Thankfully, it was evident that the organization had spent sufficient time and effort in organizing and

maintenance of their website. Thus the website proved to be very beneficial in supplying appropriate information. Even though much of the information provided on the NIAC website was further verified by comparing and evaluating the information with other sources, there is still the inevitable potential for biases. I therefore have further sought ample additional relevant resources, such as video recordings, transcripts and various publications to validate NIAC's claims and statements.

The potential for a diaspora organization's role can be vast. Although some diaspora organizations may be a risk factor towards conflict, others may be the key to conflict resolution. By looking at the potentials alive in NIAC's efforts, we are deepening the understanding of the role of the Iranian American diaspora community in peace building. While there is much left to further explore, this thesis has shed light on a minimally explored area; the role of the Iranian American diaspora in the U.S. – Iran conflict. This study supports the role of diaspora organizations like NIAC in becoming more effective and constructively engaged. This study also raises awareness of the potential to engage diaspora organizations and their representative communities, which may be beneficial to both governmental and nongovernmental agencies involved in conflict resolutions and peace building. The transnational understanding and awareness alive in diaspora is a paramount tool which has not yet fully been incorporated and utilized, in tackling transnational conflicts. Global conflicts, such as the U.S.-Iran conflict, may benefit from further engaging diaspora communities.

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