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ARTICLE

Introduction to Special Issue: Translating Iranian Migration and Diaspora Studies

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Abstract

Reflecting the ongoing migrations of Iranians and the truly global reach of the Iranian diaspora, social scientific research on the lives of Iranians in diverse global locations has been published in many languages beyond English and Persian. Despite the unprecedented accessibility of scholarship in the digital age, research in these languages nevertheless remains unevenly visible. This special issue of *Iranian Studies* focuses on Iranian migration and diaspora and presents six research articles originally authored in languages other than English or Persian from an array of (inter)disciplinary perspectives and geographic locations. The issue seeks to not only make these studies accessible to a wide readership, but also to bring them into meaningful conversation with ongoing discussions in Iranian studies, encouraging an expansive view of the Iranian diaspora that requires geographic breadth, a range of methodologies, and a broad temporal scope. If Iranian migration has long been a global phenomenon, then Iranian diaspora studies—and indeed, Iranian studies more broadly—must also become more intentionally global in its questions, conversations, and sources.

Keywords: global; Iranian diaspora; knowledge production; migration; translation

In a keynote address to open an Iranian diaspora studies conference in 2019, I half-joked that some of the most persistent assumptions about where Iranians live in the world could be quickly unsettled with a simple internet search. I did not mean a search of scholarly databases, where cities such as Los Angeles or London would come up repeatedly, but in Google Maps. Search for Iranian restaurants, I suggested, and a different map of the diaspora begins to appear, showing it is possible to find and enjoy a juicy kabob *kubideh* not only in the obvious diaspora capitals of North America or Western Europe, but also in Boise, Regina, Quito, Warsaw, Vilnius, Accra, Kampala, Cape Town, Manila, Chang Mai, and Shanghai. Though not scientific (and offered mostly in jest), my suggestion of a "*kubideh* index" nevertheless pointed to a simple fact: Iranians are living, working, gathering, and breaking bread in locations that are often far from the globally recognized hubs of diaspora activity and under more diverse circumstances than our dominant scholarly maps and, in many cases, the diaspora's own imaginations have tended to recognize.

Seven years later, the field of global Iranian diaspora studies has grown in remarkable ways, confirming the fact that a more global view of the Iranian diaspora is both

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increasingly necessary and already underway, reflecting the fact that Iranian life continues to be global, diffuse, and diverse. Like the communities with which we seek to engage, the scholarship on the Iranian diaspora has always been dispersed and multilingual, if unevenly visible. But despite the unprecedented accessibility of scholarship in the digital age, research in languages other than English often remains beyond the reach of (and thus under-cited by) English-dominated fields.

This unprecedented special issue of *Iranian Studies* offers a step towards increasing the visibility of this scholarship: the six articles in this issue form a collection of translated research articles, originally authored in languages other than English or Persian, about communities of Iranian immigrants from an array of (inter)disciplinary perspectives. Because of the languages they were written in and the contours of knowledge production in academia, this research has remained largely invisible in the world of Anglophone scholarship.[1] The contributors to this issue write from and about locations in the Global North and Global South and address the diaspora in its various stages and formations, including historical studies, research on the migration process, studies about particular communities (such as religious minorities or students), and the ways markets and economic insecurity impact decisions made by migrants and by Iranians in diaspora. More specifically, the articles offer social scientific insights into the flows of Iranians to Brazil, Spain, the United Arab Emirates, South Korea, and Japan, and the ways Iranians have navigated familial, economic, and social networks in Iran and beyond.

Presenting a more global view of this growing field to the audience of *Iranian Studies* is not only warranted to redress invisibility, it is also timely. The field of global Iranian diaspora studies is now the largest it has ever been and continues to grow rapidly, much like the diaspora it seeks to study. As evidenced by the recent three-day 2026 Conference on Global Iranian Diaspora Studies hosted by the University of Toronto, the field has become more global, more diverse, more theoretical, and more capacious than ever before. This growth reflects the groundwork laid by scholars over many decades, at first as a loose if remarkably generative network of scholars working from within their own disciplines to insist that the Iranian diaspora was neither a peripheral nor niche subject. That has especially included the work of Dr. Persis Karim in her role as director of the former Center for Iranian Diaspora Studies at San Francisco State University, but also the conferences, special issues, edited volumes, and mentoring relationships forged by scholars who have helped make this field legible to others and to itself. Thanks to these efforts, Iranian diaspora studies is no longer an emerging field; it undoubtedly has arrived.

The field is also growing, however, for more troubling reasons: war, sanctions, censorship, repression, displacement, bans, and surveillance all have contributed to ongoing migrations. The U.S. and Israeli attacks on Iran in 2025–2026, the violent suppression of protests, and continuing political uncertainty and activism across the globe have made visible what scholars of migration and diaspora have long argued: the relationship between homeland and diaspora is not one of distance or unidirectional influence, but is rather one of mutual constitution. Iranian diasporic communities are central political, cultural, and media actors seeking to shape the course of events, even as those actions and ensuing events have profoundly reshaped diasporic identities, institutions, and divisions—all of which are urgent areas for scholarly enquiry. Conducting research in Iran has also become increasingly limited, driving both the ongoing emigration of Iranians and a growing necessity to study the constraints and pathways of that migration, along with the resulting mix of migration cohorts in the diaspora locations where they arrive. Many senior and mid-career

[1] The articles in this special issue have been professionally translated into English thanks to generous support from the Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies Program at Oklahoma State University. After translation, each paper was updated and/or revised as needed for publication in *Iranian Studies*. The exception is Atsuko Tsubakihara's article, which is an original contribution.

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scholars of Iranian studies are thus turning to the diaspora as a field of inquiry instead. Meanwhile, a new generation of Iranian and non-Iranian junior scholars and graduate students who have lived and worked in Iran and have left Iran following the Green Movement or the Women, Life, Freedom movement are bringing new questions and experiences to the study of diasporic life. The result, over the last decade, has been an expansion in both the range of scholars and the scope of research subjects in this field, several of which are reflected in this issue.

The field's growth, however, has also been unevenly visible. This is, in part, because scholarship at the margins and intersections of academic disciplines is often harder to recognize and, in part, because academic networks, institutions, and citational practices remain siloed, producing distinct scholarly ecologies that complicate a holistic view of this interdisciplinary field. Further, while Persian-language scholarship is, of course, central to the study of Iranian migration and diaspora, this issue focuses specifically on scholarship produced in other non-English languages, where Iranian diasporic life has been examined through regional academic traditions that remain underrepresented in both Anglophone *and* Persian scholarly conversations.

Finally, this special issue builds on and contributes to ongoing efforts to expand research on the Iranian diaspora in all its complexities, including its geographical breadth, disciplinary methodologies, temporal scope, and thematic foci. In building a more expansive and global understanding of the Iranian diaspora, the field continues to acknowledge and include, but also decenter, the diaspora communities of the United States—not because the large communities of Iranians in the U.S. do not warrant attention, but rather because Anglophone research on Iranian Americans has dominated much of the field in its earliest decades. Work on North America and European Iranian communities has been incredibly important, often producing field-defining studies.[2] This ongoing research offers theoretical and methodological tools that enable the field to broaden its scope, expand comparative and relational approaches, and develop scholarship on new areas, especially in the Global South and on south-south relations.

The global Iranian diaspora

Iranian community groups and diaspora leaders frequently claim that six to eight million Iranians currently live in communities outside Iran.[3] In Persian, these Iranians are referred to as *khārej-neshin, mohājer*, or, more recently, borrowing the English term: *diāsporā. Diāsporā-ye Irāni* and "Iranian diaspora" tend to be used colloquially to refer to communities of Iranians whose members emigrated from Iran between the late twentieth century to the present day, and who have settled beyond Iran's borders, often in places such as North America and Western Europe.

[2] Several book-length examples include Hamid Naficy, *The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles* (Minnesota University Press, 1993); Halleh Ghorashi, *Ways to Survive, Battles to Win: Iranian Women Exiles in the Netherlands and United States* (Nova Science Publishers, 2002); Reza Gholami, *Secularism and Identity: Non-Islamiosity in the Iranian Diaspora* (Routledge, 2015); Neda Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race* (Stanford University Press, 2017); Mohsen Mobasher, ed., *The Iranian Diaspora: Challenges, Negotiations, and Transformations* (University of Texas Press, 2018); Farzaneh Hemmasi, *Tehrangles Dreaming: Intimacy and Imagination in Southern California's Iranian Pop Music* (Duke University Press, 2020); Manijeh Moradian, *This Flame Within: Iranian Revolutionaries in the United States* (Duke University Press, 2022); Sahar Sadeghi, *Conditional Belonging: The Racialization of Iranians in the Wake of Anti-Muslim Politics* (New York University Press, 2023); Amy Malek, *Culture beyond Country: Strategies of Inclusion in the Global Iranian Diaspora* (New York University Press, 2025).

[3] National census methodologies vary widely across countries, making measuring the global diaspora deeply challenging, especially in attempting to account for second and third generations, as place of birth or language use are often problematically used as stand-in metrics for ethnicity, origin, or heritage.

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Despite these colloquial uses and assumptions, as a field—and as indicated in several articles in this issue—Iranian diaspora studies scholars have demonstrated that Iranian emigration neither began in the twentieth century nor has been limited to locations glossed as "the West" or "Global North." What is new in the scholarship, however, is the broader application of the term "diaspora" to these relatively understudied communities, alongside discussions of the affordances of the concept for considering migrations and networks of Iranians that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or in borderlands and regions of the Caucuses or Central and South Asia.[4] In short—and contrary to some representations in popular Western media—the global Iranian diaspora is extremely diverse and scholarship in global Iranian diaspora studies has been expanding to capture this range of diverse positions, subjectivities, and historical and contemporary experiences of migration and diasporic life.

Even when narrowing our scope to consider today's diaspora populations, Iran's diaspora is impressively diffuse. It includes communities across North America, Europe, and Oceania, but also Asia (from Türkiye and Dubai to Mumbai and Kuala Lumpur), Latin America (from Ecuador to Brazil to Cuba), and Africa (from Egypt to Ghana to South Africa). The Iranian diaspora includes immigrants of a variety of legal statuses in these diasporic locations, including naturalized citizens, foreign-born dual citizens, refugees, permanent residents, temporary workers, students, and those with undocumented or irregular statuses. It comprises a spectrum of class positions, ethnicities, religious groups, language varieties, and political and sexual orientations. First- and second-generation immigrants in well-established communities are welcoming third-generation children and grandchildren while first-generation immigrants continue to arrive and build new communities, sometimes in locations with few other Iranians and sometimes in areas where the number of Iranians is so large that the first generation includes those whose years of arrival are sixty years apart, making for a wide diversity of experiences, ideas, and motivations that can be challenging to unite, leading to frictions and fragmentations.

Social and digital media have contributed to a greater recognition of these lines of difference, especially in contexts of geopolitical and economic crisis, where such differences can become the source of deepened divisions. In a period of war and ever-greater repression, global Iranian diaspora studies has an important role to play in analyzing these characteristics and the ways Iranians are—or are not—building new social relations, political activations, and forms of expression.

Translating Iranian diaspora studies

The articles in this issue each contribute to this broader view of Iranian migration and diaspora, whether temporally, geographically, methodologically, or, in some cases, all of the above. They also offer important contributions to wider migration studies and diaspora studies scholarship. Multiple papers address the phenomenon of onward migration, an acknowledgement that migration is rarely a linear journey of leaving country A to arrive permanently in country B. The migration pathways available to Iranians have long been precarious and non-linear, whether today amid migration bans, heightened surveillance, and xenophobia, or in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century amid the machinations of different empires. The challenges of accessing migration pathways, permanent residence, employment, and community have been continuous over an extended period of history and thus also remain important areas of research across global locations.

One way that Iranians, like other migrants, have navigated these precarious waters has been through reliance on networks of co-religionists, co-ethnics, and fellow Iranians who

[4] See, for example, Janet Afary and Kamran Afary, *Molla Nasreddin: The Making of a Modern Trickster, 1906–1911* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

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could help identify employment, housing, and education opportunities in places without a large diaspora community, such as Brazil. In **Ana Maria Raietparvar's** paper, originally published in Brazilian Portuguese, the experiences of early Baha'i immigrants who settled in Brazil in the 1950s, described as pioneers, demonstrate the challenges faced by Iranians who migrated to entirely new contexts not in search of refuge, but in an effort to spread their faith. Finding employment, housing, and stability in often difficult economic and social environments was chief among these challenges, leading several of Raietparvar's interlocutors to report that many family and friends among this pioneer generation ultimately felt forced to leave to seek more stable opportunities in places such as Canada. But those who stayed and who succeeded in building lives in both the cities and more remote areas of Brazil were often integral to the later successes of Iranians who arrived in the 1980s, this time as refugees fleeing religious persecution.

Indeed, pulling back the temporal frame from the years surrounding the 1979 Revolution allows us to see just how long Iranians—diverse in their ethnic, religious, and political identities and motivations—have been migrating to distant locations. It also reveals a fundamental friction between migration and sovereignty that both predates and continues in the nation-state system. In historian **Fernando Camacho Padilla's** paper, originally published in Spanish, we are given a much wider lens on diaspora, both temporally and geographically. Through close archival research, he demonstrates how Assyrian and Armenian Iranians found their way to Latin America, especially Argentina, simultaneously showing how states and empires have been imbricated in the early formations of Iranian diaspora communities. This formation is almost never a matter of random chance, but rather of strategic choices at numerous levels, each with its own intermediaries—whether diplomats, priests, or "priests as consuls," as Spain appointed during the Ottoman occupation of northwest Persia in the second half of 1918. Through Camacho Padilla's research, we learn that a history of Iranian Christians in Argentina is not only under-studied, but that their presence would be unlikely were it not for these diplomatic functionaries of Spain in Persia, Argentina, and the Ottoman Empire, and if not for other states that refused Iranian Christians refuge amid the aftermath of genocide, and before the establishment of an international system that could more effectively navigate the rights of refuge.

Both papers—on Baha'is and Assyrian and Armenian Christians—point to the ways in which the migration of religious minorities from Iran were key to the formation of Iranian diaspora communities long before the 1979 Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, which led to the more well-known dispersion of religious minorities worldwide.

States' policy reactions towards the emerging Islamic Republic and the growing flow of Iranian migration also played a fundamental role in determining where diaspora communities would eventually grow. Especially during the hostage crisis (1979–1981), when Iranian migration to the U.S. was halted and sanctions were imposed on Iran, Spain remained one of few countries that continued to offer Iranians visa-free entry and did not participate in economic sanctions. As **Sheida Besozzi** argues in her essay, originally authored in Spanish, a significant number of Iranians (upwards of 50,000 according to one estimate) made use of this pathway for temporary stays in Spain in the early 1980s before it, too, was withdrawn in 1983. Visa-free entry made possible many Iranians' eventual onward migration to other parts of Europe and North America. But for some, what may have initially been intended as a temporary stay became a permanent home. According to Besozzi, it was not just the difficulty of finding onward migratory pathways, but also the familiar warmth of both climate and culture that attracted Iranians to remain in Spain. Though some found the economic situation challenging and chose to find alternative courses, others remained and built lives and families, especially in Madrid. Through ethnographic interviews, Besozzi demonstrates that the similarities in Iranian and Spanish cultures facilitated forms of belonging for many of these Iranians, alongside a sense of enduring liminality.

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Despite an understandable emphasis in the literature on refugees and conflict-driven migrations to the "West," these only account for a portion of the migration pathways that have contributed to the growth of the global Iranian diaspora. Labor migration and economic instability have also been important drivers of migration, as evidenced by anthropologist **Atsuko Tsubakihara's** paper on what she terms the "Coming-to-Japan Boom": a period in the early 1990s (1989–1994) when tens of thousands of Iranian labor migrants (both official and unofficial) arrived to Tokyo in search of work. Through attention to newspapers and longitudinal sociological surveys, in this original contribution for this issue, Tsubakihara examines the economic and political conditions leading Iranians to migrate to the "East" rather than the "West," and the policies and social conditions awaiting them upon arrival. She thus contributes a historical view of Iranian migration to Japan during the 1980s and 1990s, primarily consisting of single men who experienced marginalization in Japan as undocumented labor migrants working in the informal economy. These individuals found support, access to information, and survival strategies through connecting with fellow Iranians in large gatherings in Tokyo's public parks and transit stations, a phenomenon so large and noteworthy at the time that it was widely reported in Japanese newspapers, which Tsubakihara analyzes in building a history of this unique period. Here, too, were examples of temporary stops, onward migrations, and creative or flexible solutions to precarious status, alongside the importance of social networks, co-national support systems, and reliance on cultural and social familiarity in everyday life.

Gi Yeon Koo's paper, originally published in Korean, asserts another understudied yet significant pathway for Iranian migration and diaspora formation: student visas. Her research among Iranian students in South Korean universities in the late 2010s and into the 2020s, a population dominated by women, contributes a broadened understanding of diaspora to include not only a country rarely considered in Iranian diaspora studies, but also its student diasporas. When this group has been considered in previous scholarship on Iranians, the concept of *student diaspora* or *knowledge diasporas* has been used to refer to the large number of foreign students studying in European and North American universities in the 1970s.[5] But in Koo's study, we find a growing community of Iranian students in the "East," in this case South Korea, emerging in the twenty-first century. As Koo's ethnographic research demonstrates, these students have been drawn in part by the "Korean wave"—the incredible spread and influence of Korean pop culture worldwide—as well as the South Korean government's policy incentives for international students, including the accessibility of student visas. Iranian women, in particular, have developed what Koo terms "transnational mobility strategies," leading them to travel to South Korea seeking higher education and, in many cases, careers. However, the same government that offered these incentives has also created policies that make it extremely difficult for these students to remain after graduation and build careers and lives in South Korea, widening our understanding of the similar frustrations experienced by Iranian students across the diaspora in the same period.

The influence of culture, whether as a draw for Iranian students as Koo shows in South Korea or as a foundation for shared identity as Besozzi shows in Spain, can also be a source of distinction in diaspora communities. Cultural geographer **Amin Moghadam** considers everyday life and cultural initiatives among Iranians in hyper-diverse Dubai through a long view (2015–2025) that demonstrates how migration pathways, homeland hierarchies, and symbolic capital influence the reconfiguration of social standings, belonging, and identity in the diaspora. In his ethnographic account, originally published in French, Moghadam

[5] Matthew Shannon, *Losing Hearts and Minds: American-Iranian Relations and International Education During the Cold War* (Cornell University Press, 2017); Moradian, *This Flame Within*; Amy Malek, "Reperiodizing, Reclassifying, and Reframing the Iranian American Diaspora in *This Flame Within*," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 44, no. 1 (2024): 178–82.

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compares a range of experiences of Iranians in Dubai, including the *Khodmooni* (Iranians from Iran's southern Gulf coast with longstanding ties to the region), those who emigrated from large metropolitan areas of Iran, and Iranians who arrived to Dubai from other diaspora locations. He highlights how social and cultural capital and related distinctions of taste play a central role in how Iranians perceive one another and distinguish themselves from other Iranians to non-Iranians in this particularly diverse diasporic setting. Moghadam's application of cosmopolitanism to this case lays important theoretical ground for thinking through the ways Iranians across the diaspora engage in social relations with one another beyond overly-simplistic binaries, such as first vs. second generation, or hypernationalist lenses that claim to incorporate difference in their approaches to positive public representation in the mainstreams of their societies.

A more global future for global Iranian diaspora studies

The research presented in this special issue reminds us that the uneven visibility of Iranian diaspora communities in academic research is not simply a consequence of where Iranians have migrated, but also of how scholarly knowledge is produced, circulated, and recognized. Translation offers one means of addressing these uneven patterns of visibility and reveals the structural challenges that continue to shape academic knowledge production.

Recent advances in machine translation and generative artificial intelligence may appear to offer a solution to these challenges, but their capabilities should not be overstated. While these technologies may make it easier to gain a preliminary sense of scholarship published in other languages, they remain deeply inadequate substitutes for careful scholarly translation. Producing this special issue indeed required far more than translating texts from one language into another. The articles, once professionally translated by licensed translators, were then revised, updated, and recontextualized for a different readership and wider scholarly conversation. This process demanded sustained collaboration between the authors, guest editor, and reviewers, and proved once again that translation is itself a form of scholarly labor rather than a mechanical transfer of information.

The challenges extend well beyond the work of translation itself, however. Academic publishing continues to be organized around linguistic and national boundaries that make it difficult for scholarship to circulate across fields. Copyright restrictions and permissions can complicate the republication of translated work, while journal policies and publishing conventions often discourage the kinds of cross-linguistic collaborations and accessibility that this issue seeks to foster. With rare exceptions, venues for original scholarship in multiple languages remain few; venues specifically for Iranian studies even fewer.[6] At the same time, many scholars are expected—or required—to publish in the primary language of their own country or academic system. Such expectations are understandable and often necessary for professional advancement and local scholarly engagement, but they also contribute to the fragmentation of academic conversations across linguistic communities. As a result, scholarship may remain highly influential within one national or regional context while remaining virtually unknown elsewhere.

Ultimately, this issue seeks to not only make these studies accessible to a wide readership, but also to bring them into meaningful conversation with ongoing discussions in Iranian studies, encouraging an expansive view of the Iranian diaspora that requires geographical breadth, a range of methodologies, and a broad temporal scope. If Iranian migration has long been a global phenomenon, then Iranian studies must also be more intentionally global in its questions, conversations, and sources. Doing so requires moving

[6] The bilingual Persian and English open-access journal *Global Iranian Studies Review* is an exceptional venue with the specific mission of making research in Iranian studies in both languages more accessible. Volume 2, issue 1 of that journal, published in June 2025, was dedicated to research on Iranian migration and diaspora.

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beyond an assumption that English-language scholarship offers a sufficiently diverse view of the field and acknowledging that greater engagement with scholarship produced in other languages is necessary—not as supplementary or peripheral knowledge, but as scholarship that has developed its own empirical insights and conceptual contributions. The articles collected here represent a small sample of that broader scholarly landscape. Like the diaspora it studies, the field of Iranian diaspora studies is more heterogenous, dispersed, and multilingual than our mental or scholarly maps have tended to show. To truly pursue its most promising directions, then, requires moving beyond a search in or for the usual places.

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