Returning to Iran:
Challenges and
Promises
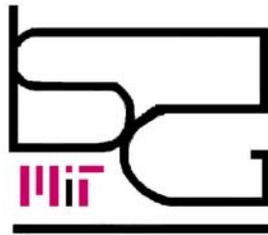
Iranian Studies Group
@
MIT

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Research Coordinators
Narges Bajoghli
Hazhir Rahmandad

Research Team
Ali Khakifirooz, Samaneh Maroufian, Yasin Saadatnejadi, Rashid Shidfar,
Mehrad Vaezinejad

Abstract

In this study we explore the factors that contribute to the success and the satisfaction of individuals who return to Iran upon completion of their studies, or after spending some time working abroad. Interviews with a number of different individuals who have returned to Iran in the last couple of decades and have made contributions to academic and business life, as well as individuals who have had a negative experience with their decision to return, informs this study. We analyze the interviews looking for common themes and useful insights that can help those who make a decision on returning to Iran in near future. The results suggest that returning to Iran is a decision often motivated by emotional and patriotic connections to Iran rather than rational calculations. Moreover, level of satisfaction differed across participants and correlated with their success in achieving their career goals in Iran. Cultural and structural barriers to working effectively have been the biggest challenges to most participants while emotional ties and outstanding students have contributed to positive experiences. We conclude with recommendations for individuals who plan to return to Iran after studying and living in the west for some time.

Introduction

The 1979 Iranian Revolution, the subsequent Iran-Iraq War, the resulting economic crisis, and social and cultural pressures forced many to emigrate from Iran in the ensuing years. In these past twenty-six years, Iran has experienced one of the highest rates of "brain drain" in the world, as many professionals and students have left the country to work/study in Western Europe, North America, and Australia[1]. However, within the past decade, a few professionals have chosen to return to Iran, and this study focuses on their experiences. This paper will highlight the main reasons behind these decisions to return to Iran and explores the rewards and challenges that these individuals face. After a short

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[1] Different sources put the number of Iranian immigrants at different levels. Based on International Monitory Fund reports (see: http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/030612_h-ag-braindrain.shtml) the number of educated Iranians immigrating from the country stands at 150-180 thousand annually, the first rank between 91 developing and under-developed countries.

overview on the background of the participants and research methods, we discuss the responses to the following five central questions which motivated this study:

- Why did they return?
- Are they happy with their decision? How successful have they been in reaching their goals?
- What have been the biggest challenges?
- What have been the biggest benefits?
- What are the main lessons to learn from their experience?

Background of Participants and Research Approach:

The study is based on interviews with 10 individuals who have returned to Iran after studying and living in West. The interviews followed a set of predefined questions (See Appendix A for the list of questions), but allowed for open discussion on different themes when opportunity allowed. The interviews where conducted in 2004, through E-mail, phone, and in person, depending on the availability of interviewees and members of the research team, and most of them were record. The individuals interviewed for this study are between the ages of 30-60, all hold a post-graduate or doctoral degree, have spent anywhere between 2-17 years living in Western countries, and currently work in either the industry sector or academia in Iran (roughly half in the industry and half in academia). Different interviews were reviewed and common themes where extracted in response to the main questions that motivated this study. The main findings are synthesized in this report. Note that the sample size for this study is very small and therefore the generalizeability of results is suspect, nevertheless, the results clarify some common themes and lessons.

Why did they return?

For the most part, the majority of individuals interviewed stated that their desire to move back was motivated by the fact that they wanted to contribute to Iran's development—that they wanted to have an impact on society. Moreover, despite living for numerous years in the West, many disliked the "work only" culture dominant in these societies and missed the warmth and family culture of Iran. Some found their value system better

aligned with the life in Iran. Therefore, the decision was often not justified in terms of cost-benefit analysis of material factors, and an emotional dimension was needed to tip the balance towards returning to Iran. Moreover, many found their friends to be against the decision while their family was supportive of it. In short, the desire to impact their "own" society coupled with cultural differences and familial connections are the main reasons that all interviewees decided to return.

Are they happy with their decision? How successful have they been in reaching their goals?

The participants differ significantly in their level of satisfaction with their decision to return to Iran, some are relatively happy with it, while some are dissatisfied and inclined to go back to West. In general it is hard to make a judgment about relative life satisfaction, since the participants have forgone the alternative life (of living in the West) and therefore could not make any direct comparisons. Nevertheless, it appears that those who were successful in achieving some of their goals with regard to contribution to Iranian society, and had developed a successful career, were happier with their decisions.

A few tentative trends which partially explain the successfulness of different initiatives include:

- There are many potential opportunities in the industry that can be successfully used. These opportunities are not distributed evenly between different sectors: the new industries where the power structure is not yet shaped and governmental intervention is less salient have the highest opportunities. Examples include information technology, consulting, and financial markets. However, exploiting the potentials need a set of skills, many of which are not acquired through education in West.

- Entrepreneurship and institution-building remain central to creating opportunities. Despite some increase in recent years (mostly due to international investments and new large firms) there are few pre-specified, well-paying jobs available. Successful people tend to create the opportunities themselves through starting new ventures which satisfy some unmet need. In short, people who are interested in taking the risks of entrepreneurial activity have better prospects of job satisfaction and making a significant contribution to the Iranian society.

- In the academia the structures are more clearly defined and entrepreneurial activity (e.g. starting a new department or program) is less of an option, with the possible exception of new and growing fields such as management and economics. Under these conditions success is harder, and depends on skills and criteria beyond research aptitude, to secure funds, steer the politics of the departments, and do quality research given very limited resources. The chances of doing quality research also depends strongly on the specific area: theoretical and applied research often have higher chances of success than experimental fields where the resource and equipment become a significant disadvantage for Iranian researchers compared to the international competition.

What have been the biggest challenges?

Most participants in the study found that once they returned to Iran, they felt out of touch with society, its rules, and the work culture. As one interviewee, who lived in the UK for 20 years stated: "In reality, I was not familiar with the system here any longer because I had not worked here. I've seen the challenges of delivering quality work here because the business culture in Iran is different from what I'm used to." The challenges include both structural factors about how the political, social, and economic systems work, as well as cultural issues. The first category include an inefficient system and government that is not willing to help, and in many instances creates more obstacles; inefficiency of many basic support systems (e.g. bureaucracy, transportation), and a strong resistance to change within different institutions, from private firms to academic departments. Cultural challenges include a low level of respect given to quality work; lack of honesty and transparency; lack of high quality workers (and immigration of those who are trained); and a general attitude of disillusionment among the population.

What have been the biggest benefits?

The experiences of the participants also produce rewards which encourage them to continue their lives in Iran. These include being with family and not feeling isolated; working for their own society and feeling like they are making a small impact; and for the participants in academia, the bright and eager students they deal with on a daily basis differs from their experience with more apathetic students in Western institutions. Most

participants felt that despite the frustrations of working in Iran, they felt more satisfied working here than in their respective societies in the West, because they felt like they were moving towards a goal and making a real impact, however small it may be.

What are the main lessons to learn from their experience?

The decision to move to Iran is a very personal one, all participants said. It depends on the individual and his/her motivations and goals for coming back to Iran. However, a few common lessons can help those who consider this decision, or have decided to return back to Iran:

- The overall consensus was to be realistic—to not romanticize Iran and the impact you will have on society, but to realize that this society has many beautiful and ugly things coexisting. Can you put up with the frustrations you will face in society? Thus, come with low expectations, but do not forget your own goals.

- You should not expect a red carpet to be awaiting you if you decide to move back; do not plan on others' promises when deciding to move back. Moreover, be modest and willing to play by Iran's societal and professional rules. Come with the knowledge that getting a simple task done in a certain ministry may take one week, but do not expend your energy trying to change the bureaucracy in Iran, instead, be flexible.

- All participants emphasized that the key ingredient in finding or creating what you want to do in Iran is through networks. Since business in Iran still depends on "who you know," given the right contacts produces positive results. Whether in business or academia, it was hard for the participants when they first arrived to realize that promotion in the work place is not based on merits and achievement, but on "who you know." Thus, for those who did not have a strong network of contacts when they first arrived, they spent a portion of their first year aggressively developing this and found that it paid off later.

- Some of the participants emphasized that the key to their success was maintaining a positive attitude, even if it is hard to do so.

- From their experience, many participants also found that there is much room for growth and generating money in the business field. Young demographics,

changing tastes, low levels of competition, low energy costs, and several untapped markets, have created many potentially rewarding business opportunities in Iran. The challenge is to learn the skills of building a new business in Iran and training and retaining high-quality human resources.

- Shape your environment to buffer your relationship with the many negative realities of the society. You can do this both through shaping the physical environment in which you work, as well as in selection and training of the group you collaborate with.

- Plan on training the people you want to work with. It takes time and energy, but is crucial for your success and satisfaction with your work.

- Do not burn the bridges behind you; retain your ability to return to West if you decide to do so at some time in future. This will give you an alternative option which can save you from despair should things not work in Iran according to your plans and expectations. In fact, many of the participants in our research followed this advice and benefited from it.

- If you are not completely sure about returning to Iran, try to travel to Iran for extended periods (this works especially well for those in academia with long summer vacations) and explore working opportunities there, before committing to full return.

Appendix 1- Questionnaire

Background information
1. **Duration of stay abroad:** When did you first leave Iran and when did you come back to Iran permanently?
2. **Country:** In which country did you live?
3. **Field of Study or Occupation when abroad:** What was your field of study? In which profession were you working?
4. **Family ties:** When going to Iran, were you married? Had kids? How much of your extended family was still in Iran?
5. **Keeping options open:** Do you still have easy options to live outside of Iran? Are you a citizen or permanent immigrant to the US?

Experiences
6. **Pros of Life Abroad:** What did you like most about living abroad?
7. **Cons of Life Abroad:** What were some challenges you faced?
8. **Motivations for Return:** What were some of the motivating factors to return to Iran? If more than one, please rank with 1 being the most important.

[ ] Ideology (Patriotism, feeling of responsibility)
[ ] Core Family considerations (wife, children)
[ ] Culture
[ ] Parents/relatives
[ ] Friends
[ ] Children's Education
[ ] Academic opportunities
[ ] Business opportunities
[ ] Possessions
[ ] Other (please name) :

9. **Transition:** Was it easy for you to find a position once back in Iran?
10. **Pros of Returning to Iran:** What has been most rewarding about returning to Iran?
11. **Cons of Returning to Iran:** What were the main challenges you faced, in comparison with staying and living abroad?
12. **Initial expectations:** How did your expectations change once you returned?
13. **Personal life:** How is you personal life affected by the return? How has your family adjusted? Is there any conflict of interest between you and your family on where to live?
14. **Hindsight:** Have you ever regretted the decision to return?

Important Factors
15. Did you have attractive professional opportunities available to you when abroad?
16. How strong was your personal network in Iran?
17. Were your family, friends etc. supportive of your return?

18. What do you think has contributed to your success/failure in financial/ contribution/ overall success?
19. Did your experience (educational, professional) abroad contribute to your success in Iran? In what way?

Retrospective Evaluation (How you evaluate their experience overall)
20. How satisfied you are with your life financially?
21. How stimulated are you personally or intellectually?
22. In your view, how have you contributed to the society in Iran by returning? What are the main contributions you wouldn't have made had you not returned to Iran?
23. Did you achieve the goals you had when going back?
24. What opportunities you think you have lost as a result of this decision?

Suggestions for others thinking to return
25. If somebody wants to make this decision today, what are the important issues you believe they should take into account?
26. What are the important factors that can contribute to the success of somebody going back to Iran at this time?
27. What are the pitfalls for somebody who wants to go back at this time?
28. What are the main opportunities for Iranians outside to come back (which areas, what types of contributions, business/academic/governmental etc)?
29. What are the main opportunities for Iranians outside to contribute without coming back?
30. If you had a real option, right now, to choose between living abroad and living in Iran in the same position, which one would you choose? Why?

Future
31. What may persuade you to leave Iran at this stage?
32. How do you see the prospects in Iran in the next 3-5 years and 8-10 years? How hopeful are you for future?

Wrap Up
33. Who do you suggest us to talk to for this study?
34. Is there anything else you want to add, other factors that are important but we are missing? Process considerations?