Narrowing and Broadening Racial Identity

Exploring Middle Eastern American Immigrants' Identity Formation Through a Social Race Construction Framework

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Abstract

The purpose of my research is to understand the development of the individual level Middle Eastern American racial identity and establish the position of Middle Easterners in the U.S. racial hierarchy. I examine first-generation Iranian American immigrants' individual experiences and perceptions of racism and racial identity in the U.S. along with knowledge of race in Iran. My findings support the application of a social race construction framework in immigration studies because assimilation theory fails to account for disparate outcomes of racialized immigrant groups and legitimizes the U.S. racial hierarchy through a colorblind lens. These theoretical tools are valuable for civil organizing within the Middle Eastern American community for broader legal protections and social awareness.

Introduction

I seek to understand the development of the individual level Middle Eastern American racial identity and establish the position of Middle Easterners in the U.S. racial hierarchy. The intellectual question I present in this paper relates to multiple fields of research, including assimilation theory, the social race construction model, and scholarship examining the racialization and identity-building of immigrants that expands the white-Black race binary. In the literature review, I will weigh the advantages of social race constructionist theory alongside the drawback of assimilation theory when studying immigrant groups' experiences in the United States. I first review assimilation theory from the creation of classical assimilation theory, explain contemporary assimilation theories, and share criticisms of this model. In this paper, I advocate for a complete departure from assimilation theory in immigration studies. Therefore, I begin the literature review with an explanation of this model in order to give criticisms and introduce alternative frameworks.

I transition to an exploration of the social race construction framework because its application in immigration studies opens new avenues for examining the racialization of immigrant populations, their social trajectories, and other trends among immigrant populations. I follow this section with an overview of how social race construction has been applied in the body of scholarship studying Middle Eastern American immigrant groups' experiences and their identity formation in the United States. This body of literature discards assimilation theory to critically examine the racial realities a broad community of immigrants. I intend to directly respond to this scholarship the most because I also examine the racialized experiences of Middle Eastern Americans in this paper. Specifically, I study the racialized social experiences and identity formation of Iranian American immigrants. Next, I give a political and historical account of Iranian immigration to the United States in order to contextualize factors influencing Iranian immigration and their reception in the United States. Together, this review of the existing literature paves a way to understanding the development of the individual level Middle Eastern American racial identity and fix the position of Middle Easterners in the U.S. racial hierarchy.

I draw from interview data to determine the social construction of the Iranian American racial identity. In the methods section, I describe the interpretive practice of the interview style I employ in this research. Interviews focused on individual experiences and perceptions of racism, assimilation, and identity in the U.S. combined with knowledge of race in Iran. Evidence from these interviews highlights numerous themes defining the formation of the Iranian American community and racial identity, which I fully describe in the results section. These themes include proximity to whiteness, Iranian racial ideology, strategically weighing between Iranian and Persian identities, racialized political events, identity in the United States, and agency amid the pressure to assimilate. The first three themes focus on how home country racial ideology initially shapes

Iranian American racial identity. I characterize race in Iran as a narrowing of identity because the limited bounds of Iranian ethnonational identity exclude many minority communities in Iran and foreign neighbors from a shared identity. The last few themes explore how identity is reformulated when confronted with a racialized experience in the United States. I describe this as a broadening of identity because Iranian Americans find their racial identity erased by broad stereotypical perceptions and prejudice that meshes them together with other Middle Eastern immigrant groups.

In the discussion and conclusion section, I describe how the findings of this research are relevant to understanding the construction of Middle Eastern American racial identity broadly, as well as the social race formation of pan-brown immigrant groups that fall outside the U.S. white-Black paradigm. Immigrants are not a blank slate who encounter race for the first time when entering a multi-racial society organized in a racial hierarchy, such as the United States. Immigrants' social trajectories in the United States cannot be fully explored through assimilation theory because assimilation frameworks do not fully capture racialized social experiences in the United States. I urge a shift in immigration studies to study through the lens of social race formation, rather than assimilation theory. I will also discuss how this paper's findings are significant outside academia and provide theoretical tools valuable for civil organizing within the Middle Eastern American community. My findings reveal how community norms and home country racial ideology reinforce white supremacy and ultimately act to the detriment of Iranian Americans as a racialized immigrant group. An "honorary white" identity erases their struggles and creates barriers to legal protections and social awareness.

Literature Review

Assimilation Theory

Assimilation theory has prevailed in the sociology of immigration as the dominant lens to study immigrant groups' social trajectories. Assimilation theory explains the integration of immigrant groups to the host society as a linear process of acculturation and structural incorporation, where ethnic and national distinctions are minimized over time. The classical assimilation perspective was introduced by Robert Park and William Burgess in the Chicago School of Sociology in the 1920s. At this time European immigration was fundamentally changing the American urban landscape, and new scholarship was being produced to understand shifts in and relationships between demographics and cultures. Park and Burgess observed the influx of (primarily Western) European immigrants as they began to form their theory of immigrant adaptation to the host society (Alba & Nee, 1997, 827).

Classical assimilation scholars describe assimilation as the potential for both the host society and the new immigrants to adapt to one another's cultures while living in close proximity until a mutual identity is forged (Treitler, 2015, 154). Still, the classical assimilationists also emphasized the eventual "Americanization" of these immigrants, who found it necessary to adapt to English, U.S. lifestyles and work schedules, and American culture, and at the same time, were distanced from their home country language, routine, and culture that were no longer relevant to their new way of life (Feldmeyer, 2018, 36). Early on in this theory's formation lay a contradiction between forging a mutual identity and immigrant populations finding it necessary to abandon features of their ethnic backgrounds to live amongst the host society. Without interrogating the necessity of adaptation, classical assimilationists began to operate under the assumption that this process was inevitable and natural.

The expansion of classical assimilation theory introduced the concept of "mainstream society." Instead of two culturally different groups adapting to one another, all ethnic-cultural minorities strive to adapt to the culture of "mainstream society." While seldom directly defined, the concept of the "mainstream society" invariably meant white Anglo-Saxon protestants" (Zhou-Gonzalez, 2019, 386). There may have been observable tolerance by the dominant group towards new immigrant populations. However, classical assimilation insisted on being modeled like a linear line in a single direction, rather than two lines intersecting or joining into one.

Classical assimilation did not only encompass cultural adaptation among immigrants, but it also aimed to describe their social progress. Classical assimilationists observed cultural adaptation as necessary in the process of economic mobility. Success in both of these processes would elevate social status (Feldmeyer, 2018, 38). Classical assimilationists recorded observations of accelerators or barriers to success. In a 1945 study by Warner and Srole, the researchers organized ethnic immigrants in hierarchical rankings based on their ability to "successfully assimilate". Phenotypical distinctions and skin-color were part of the evidence presented in the order of the hierarchy. Warner and Srole classified those immigrants whose appearance was most diverse from the white Anglo-Saxon protestants at the bottom of the hierarchy (Feldmeyer, 2018, 38). However, this observation of hierarchy critically acknowledged an uneven power between immigrants and the host society. More specifically, a hierarchy that awarded proximity to whiteness.

Park and Burgess founded the classical assimilation perspective when the majority of immigrants arriving in the U.S. were of European origin. Until 1965, the Immigration Act of 1964 controlled annual immigrant arrivals by a nationality quota system. This system limited immigration for each nationality to 2% of the nationality's current representation in the U.S.

population (Tehranian, 2008, 62). Consequently, this system favored immigrants of European nationalities already represented among the U.S. population. Furthermore, there also existed laws that excluded certain non-European immigrant groups from U.S. citizenship, even though their communities have existed in the U.S. for a considerable time. For example, the Chinese Exclusion Act barred immigrants from China and denied Chinese Americans currently residing in the United States citizenship eligibility. The nationality quota system replaced a race-based naturalization system, which lasted from 1790 to 1952 (Beydoun, 2013, 29). During the naturalization era, eligibility for citizenship explicitly rested on proving legal whiteness. Demonstrating eligibility meant immigrants attended a naturalization hearing where they presented evidence such as national origin, phenotypical evidence, religion, and successful personal and professional assimilation to U.S. society for a judge to determine. The definition of white changed throughout these hearings based on racial science, physical appearance, and social inclusion arguments as new, diverse immigrants sought naturalization (Beydoun, 2013).

For the majority of U.S. history, immigration law has explicitly or implicitly barred immigrants of non-European origins. The classical assimilationists insisted that all ethnic groups would eventually assimilate, even if the process varied among populations. While distinct cultures were present among new immigrants, and many of these immigrant groups were considered non-white at the time, concepts of ethnicity were a separate concept from racial minorities (Afro-Americans, Latin Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans) (Omi, 1994, 16). Not only did classical assimilation operate on the premise that the ethnic immigrants it studied were not racially distinct from the host society, but the institutional and ideological nature of race in America was absent from the considerations of the theory as well (Omi, 1994, 10).

A few variances to the Anglo-Conformity model arose from classical assimilation theory. American sociologist Milton Gordon put forth a cultural pluralist model, which invited consideration of American society becoming more tolerant and accepting of ethnic distinctions so that straight-line assimilation would be a less relevant process over time. Gordon also formed a distinction between cultural and structural assimilation. Acculturation was the adaptation to American cultural traits and social behaviors. Milton defines structural assimilation as fully belonging to the host society in the sense that one has access to its institutions. Not every immigrant population underwent both processes to an equal degree, and there were also variances between immigrant groups (Gordon, 1981). Douglass Massey put forth the "spatial assimilation model", which focused on the geographical site of integration as a key factor in the process of assimilation. The host society's foreign and native populations would occupy different spaces, and definitions of these two populations were fluid. As an immigrant population would elevate their status in the host society, the space they occupy would change to reflect it. Therefore, residency was an observable feature of a population's assimilability (Massey, 1985, 94). Overall, these new theories reinforced the existing agenda within classical assimilation rather than expand or transform the theory in any significant way.

Nearing the 21st century, more scholars began to scrutinize the assumptions and ambiguities inherent to the classical assimilation model. In his essay, *Is Assimilation Dead?* American sociologist, Nathan Glazer reflects on the dissonance between classical assimilation theory and how assimilation forces in the United States interact with ethnic and racial minorities in the United States. Glazer identifies the greatest shortcoming of classical assimilation to be its neglect of acknowledging Black Americans' position in U.S. society. Assimilation theory conveniently ignores the racial history that formed this nation and shapes all the interactions within

it (Glazer, 1993, 126). The language of the "majority" or "mainstream" society" obscures what communities are excluded and marginalized from the dominant society (Glazer, 1993, 123). In other words, this language obscures *who* is being dominated.

The colorblind language and framework of assimilation theory is a blatant deficiency when studying non-white immigrant populations today. Although, the colorblindness of assimilation theory has always been a deficiency even when most immigrants in the United States were of white European descent. The United States is built on institutions of systematic racism. To be colorblind is to completely ignore systematic racial oppression that impacts how whites and non-whites, the native population and immigrants, integrate into society.

New frameworks arose that sought to keep assimilation theory relevant in explaining new immigrant groups' social trajectory, predominantly from the global South. The "revived" assimilation model seeks to accommodate new immigration patterns and abandon old scholarly taboos. These scholars do not explain assimilation as a uniform process with a single endpoint, but as a flexible course with an eventual outcome of assimilation into the dominant culture (Alba & Nee, 1997, 827). Alba & Nee consider a continuous stream of immigration (predominantly from the global South) and the "racial distinctiveness" of these new immigrants (Alba & Nee, 1997, 842 - 845). New vocabulary and factors of measuring assimilation are proposed, such as socioeconomic attainment, spatial patterns, and intermarriage.

Segmented assimilation theory weighs racial and class stratifications constraining the social trajectories of certain immigrant groups, resulting in various "segmented pathways and outcomes of incorporation" (Zhou-Gonzalez, 2019, 387). Neo-assimilation focuses on generational assimilation processes and suggests that later generations will continue to assimilate closer to the host society than newer generations. New empirical research of the second and third

generations of immigrants after the civil rights era suggests new generations have increased social mobility. Nevertheless, not all immigrants are beginning on equal footing (Zhou-Gonzalez, 2019, 387- 389).

Newer assimilation models acknowledge varying socioeconomic outcomes among immigrant populations. Traits such as national origin, citizenship status, and ethnic/racial background shape the speed and direction of these trajectories as well (Zhou-Gonzalez, 2019, 387-389). Assimilation theory remains a foundational theory in the sociological study of immigration. Contemporary scholars have recrafted assimilation theory include considerations of race, class, and citizenship in understanding integration patterns among immigrant groups. Still, the second generation of the assimilation model does not stray far from classical assimilation, especially in its ambiguities. Theories proposing segmented assimilation and neo-assimilation acknowledge that there is no uniform assimilation process. Since classical assimilation only explains assimilation for a limited group of European white immigrants, and contemporary assimilation theories propose variances in trajectories among new, racialized immigrant populations, does assimilation even exist? Classical assimilation studied how new white immigrants integrate into a dominant white population. Classical assimilation does not explain immigrant trajectories so much as it describes integration into the dominant white culture. The set of findings from this field are not relevant to today's immigration landscape.

Aside from contemporary assimilationist theories, new lenses have been introduced and gaining prominence in immigration studies. Calls have been made for citizenship focus in the sociological study of immigration because of the new significance citizenship has taken in the age of transnationalism and mass immigration. Increasing and diverse international immigration is challenging the meaning of citizenship as significant to national identity, sovereignty, and state

control. New meanings of citizenship in the context of civic versus ethnic citizenship, multiculturalism, assimilation expands the boundaries of nation-states by dual citizenship, transnationalism, and post-nationalism. The scholars urge a more methodological approach to understand how immigration has expanded and redefined the meaning of citizenship (Bloemraad, Korteweg & Yurdaku, 2008). Bloemraad identifies four aspects of citizenship: rights, belonging, legal status, and participation. The author also considers multiculturism in the sense of state policy and discourse related to legal status and participation.

Citizenship by definition is predicated on exclusion. Second-class citizenship acknowledges that racialized minorities are limited in the benefits granted to them by privilege, but also historically access to citizenship has been grounds for mobilizing racialized minorities (Bloemraad, 2015). Discussions of second-class citizenship or conditional citizenship (Lalami, 2016) provide new opportunities to explore how racialization shapes various immigrant communities' social and political experience. Though, this conversation does not capture immigrants' identity-building in response to racialized social experiences. Racial identity and the group's position in the racial hierarchy of the society are determiners of the conditions of their citizenship Centering race illuminates how immigrant communities reformulate their racial identities in the face of marginalization.

Some scholars have raised the issue of the "culturalization" of citizenship as a perspective of understanding who is deemed unassimilable and the "forever foreigner" based on extra-legal requirements implicitly tied to citizenship, and previously explicitly and legally tied to naturalization. The concepts of "unassimilable" and "forever foreigners" are rejections of assimilation, not only from the perspective of immigrant's agency but the rejection of immigrants by the host society. Pointing the finger back at the dominant culture reveals there is no such thing

as successful assimilation in most cases. The dominant culture has designed the blueprint of assimilation while simultaneously drawing the boundaries of belonging with the intention of exclusion.

Other scholars have focused on the intersections and divergences between assimilation and transnationalism, diaspora and racialization to form self-identification as "positioned belongings". Resistance to assimilation can be the response to exclusion in the host state combined with diasporic ties (Brocket, 2020). The assimilationist landscape is not the ideal environment to introduce fresh thoughts on multiculturalism, transnationalism, citizenship, and the politics of belonging. The core of the theory obscures, rather than confronts power hierarchies that form the host society immigrants are arriving to. (Schinkel, 2018). Scholars have made an effort to push past emphasizing "integration" and "society" for a more attentive study of how migrants move across social ecologies. The main critiques the author raises are the lack of conceptual definition of “society” and integration monitoring as a form of neocolonial knowledge production. Frameworks centering citizenship, transnationalism, and the politics of belonging are all original, insightful methods for understanding the trajectories of immigrant populations that expand upon the conclusions made in the assimilation model.

Some scholars advocate for a clean break from assimilationist studies for exploring new themes in the sociology of immigration. Critiques identify assumptions that found the canonical works in this field as relevant to engaging with its white supremacist undertones. The neoclassical assimilationists assume assimilation to be “Not only inexorable and unidirectional, it is also seen as desirable” (Jung, 2009, 377). Segmented assimilationists work within the language of assimilation without interrogating the assumptions made, “Segmented assimilation theorists seldom, if ever, define the “underclass” (Jung, 2009, 385). Defining assimilation as organic,

accidental, or inevitable masks hierarchies and institutional facilitators of assimilations. Specific critiques include unfounded comparisons of European and non-European migrants, misreading of immigrant population trajectories, historical exclusion of Black Americans from analysis while naming the mystical "underclass", and the implicit and explicit advocating of assimilation of migrants through power incentives and hierarchies. With the evolution of assimilation theory, its racial unconscious has prevailed and all the underlying misleading assumptions it puts forth.

These critiques support a shift from the language of difference to inequality and domination and assimilation to politics of national identity to directly engage with white supremacy and racial ideology impacting immigrant trajectories (Jung, 2009). Assimilation scholarship fails to delegitimize the prevailing racial order by understanding immigrant group trajectories from a colorblind, meritocracy analysis. Support has arisen for studying sociology from the framework of social race construction since assimilation theory fails to account for social agency being a product of racial inequalities and legitimizes the U.S. racial hierarchy through a colorblind lens (Treitler, 2015).

> "Migration-receiving, economically more developed nations (called "core" countries in world-system analyses) are also highly racialized—meaning that racial dynamics are integral to the routinized socio- economic relations that rule over everyday life. While newcomers to a racialized society may not immediately or fully understand how race works in the new destination, learning their place in the local racial system is a normal part of immigrant incorporation. At the same time, immigrants are no more passive about their racial incorporation than any other racialized group in the system; they exercise their agency in response to acquired knowledge about their incorporation, specifically, and the new racial system itself, as a whole. People worldwide are surely racialized well before they have face-to- face and daily engagement with members of destination societies, but certainly post-migration newcomers engage with destination racial systems immediately, and this is when their incorporation into a new society begins. There in the new racial system they join the non-migrants and veteran migrants already acting in racialized and racializing ways themselves" (Treitler, 2015, 159).

Explanations of “mainstream society” and the “permanent underclass” remain elusive as to leave racial hierarchies in a white supremacist society unnamed. Some scholars have entirely diverged from assimilation theory and call for immigration studies to center race in their analysis.

I am particularly interested in shifting from assimilation theory to a social race construction framework in immigration studies to seek new findings on the social construction of immigrants’ racial identities. Classical assimilation is wholly inadequate for such research because the assimilation lens censures race as a concept that is merely a handicap that must be minimized or hidden to assimilate successfully. New assimilation theories make some considerations about race. However, they are still deficient because they operate on the foundations of assimilation theory, which insists that immigrant social realities can be observed by studying their social trajectories as a journey towards assimilation. In the following section, I offer an alternate framework, social race construction, for studying topics in immigration studies such as racialized experience, social trajectories, and identity-building.

Social Race Construction in Immigration Studies

The dominating racial theory alongside assimilation theory has historically been the race-relations framework. Similar to assimilation theory, the race-relations framework largely ignores structural racism and gives undue attention to moral and ideological rationales of racism, and individual level racial interactions. Explanations of social dynamics over-emphasize ethnicity, class, or nation paradigms, relying on similarly racially unconscious assumptions made in assimilationist studies. The popular racial frameworks' primary issue is their conceptualization of racism as floating ideas rather than racial ideology rooted in a structural foundation. There are a host of limitations to analyzing racism through the idealist framework. The "racialized social

system" perspective in partner with racial formation theory is an alternative framework with many advantages. The racialized social system is defined as societies in which economic, political, social, and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories of race (Bonilla-Silva, 1997).

Social race formation views “race as a fundamental axis of social organization” in the United States (Omi & Winant, 1994, 13). In the book *Racial Formation in the United States From the 1960s to the 1990s*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant give a historical account of racial formation processes to highlight the application of their racial formation theory in the contemporary U.S. context. The historical comparisons show that ethnicity, class, and nationality frameworks do not explain the inequality as aptly as racial formation theory does. The authors’ conception of racial formation and racial projects is extremely useful in discussing the social construction of race (Omi & Winant, 1994). The social formation of race has been effectively applied to study the relationships between social and legal whiteness. Haney López conveys that racial formation is relational to power hierarchies. Most significant is his point that races are constructed relationally against one another, rather than in isolation (Haney López, 1994). This scholarship does not touch on immigrant populations’ relationship to whiteness (social or legal) before arriving in the United States, which is a factor in how they negotiate their white identity. Also, further research can explore how immigrant populations accept and reject their legal whiteness as it relates to their social and political realities. More specifically, what are the ways immigrants perceive legal whiteness serving them or harming them?

Social race construction is the choice racial theory to approach contemporary immigration studies. Many scholars support this framework because it can explain shifts in the U.S. racial hierarchy from a Black-white binary to a majority-minority society while still accounting for its

roots in anti-Black racism and white supremacy. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, political sociologist and professor of sociology at Duke University, as well as the current president of the American Sociological Association, describes the U.S. racial structure as transforming from a white/non-white binary to three racial strata: white, honorary white, and collective Black. Bonilla-Silva describes the new racial order as Latin Americanization, the two key features are three loosely organized racial strata and a pigmentocratic logic. Pigmentocratic logic introduces pathways for studying colorism's role in forming racial identity and host countries' racial ideology. This broad thesis is supported by evidence of significant gaps in the socioeconomic status of the three groups, self-identification, and interactions between groups. Bonilla-Silva categorizes Arab Americans as honorary white, though acknowledging increasing hate crimes and discrimination to make their position subject to shift downward (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 946). Bonilla-Silva provides a categorical hierarchy that is extremely relevant for classifying racialized immigrant populations, however, not much insight is given into immigrants' perceptions of these categories and how they fit into them. For instance, within the honorary white category, further research can be done to understand immigrant group's relationship to white privilege and self-identification with whiteness.

Social race frameworks are apt for studying immigration because racial categories should be understood as socially, politically, and culturally significant within the larger racial society. Ultimately, shifts in racial categories change an individual or group's positionality within larger racial hierarchies. Information can be derived from racial categories about the forces of exclusion/inclusion shaping the racial hierarchy. As Vilna Bashi puts it, "Racial categories emerge from and comprise a racial hierarchy, and our changing categories provide a breadcrumb trail showing what we accept and reject about race as a normative hierarchical ordering of human beings, and where we see ourselves in that ordering" (Bashi, 1998, 966). These frameworks also

expand the Black-white paradigm with historically contextualized racial dynamics in the United States to explain new, non-American Black immigrant communities. This idea further supports the racial hierarchy shifting in the Black/non-Black binary racial order as white and non-Black immigrants improve their social mobility by maintaining the status quo of dominating Black Americans (Bashi, 1998). Bashi expands on her application of social race construction in immigration studies to reflect on immigration policies. Western democracies have organized their immigration policies[1] to reflect a shared interest in excluding Black immigrants (not simply in favor of white immigrants). Comparative historical analysis of policies regarding populations of Black migrants to support the author's theory of a transnationalization of racialized immigration policy.[2] This analysis is useful in observing global racial ideologies that reflect the large-scale consequences of anti-Black racism. Once again, Bashi elegantly describes the structural harms perpetuated by social racialization, “we see the trees (here, the social construction of racial categories in local settings) but miss the forest (processes reinforcing transnational racialized and world systematic hierarchies)" Bashi, 2004, 600).

[1] Sáenz, R., & Manges provide a historical account of the racialization of immigrants through U.S. immigration policy to emphasize that as racial hostility and inequality towards non-European immigrants has always existed and prevails. In response to the assimilation model’s failure to interrogate the impact of U.S. immigration policy on non-white immigrates, the authors assert "the integration of migrants needs to be considered in light of processes that allocate resources and opportunities to its citizenry in a racialized manner" (Sáenz & Manges, 2015, 167) and that immigration, naturalization, and enforcement are all mechanisms of racialized social control which impact immigrants. The authors undertake the historical account of exclusionary U.S. immigration policy alongside the creation and rise of the assimilation model to call for the racialization of immigration studies to “fully incorporate race perspectives into the study of immigrants” ((Sáenz & Manges, 2015, 166).

[2] American sociologist, Mary Romero, advocates for a critical race theory approach to immigration studies to respond to contemporary immigration injustices such as racial surveillance, crimmigration, and the militarization of the U.S.- Mexico border, products of the transnationalization of racialized immigration policy. Critical race theory treats race as not merely a variable to control for, but a key impact in racialized immigrant experiences. Romero details the case of the immigration raids in collaboration with local police in Chandler, Arizona (Romero, 2008, 30). The raids targeted a predominantly Latino neighborhood and law enforcement agencies regularly practiced racial profiling and stereotyping of individual’s work and ethnic background to make proactive assumptions about their citizenship status (Romero, 2008, 31). The Chandler Immigration raids are evidence of the significance of critically considering race in studying immigration and recognizing the racialization of constructing citizenship in everyday practices (Romero, 2008). In her promotion of critical race theory in immigration studies, Romero argues assimilation theory is the "master narrative" of immigration and exposes undertones of white supremacy and the erasure of racialized minority narratives (Romero, 2008, 25).

Scholars have also conceptualized social race formation as a response and alternative framework, given explicit critiques to assimilation theory. Assumptions of the assimilation model rely on an immigrant landscape comprised mainly of culturally distinct European immigrants. The authors critique the gaps in assimilation theory when accounting for recent waves of immigrants featuring largely non-European, economically diverse immigrants by applying racial stratification. Sociologists can use this framework to explain both individual immigrant outcomes and social relations between racially distinct categories of immigrants and natives. The authors emphasize "that racial stratification is a dichotomous hierarchy, and to properly study it, one must look at the social relations between and socioeconomic outcomes for both the group that comes out on top and the one that is on the bottom" (McDaniel & Bashi, 1997, 671). This explanation points out that the assimilation model works on the assumption that Black Americans are unassimilable or ignores them completely- either way, it fails to explain the trajectories of native and immigrant Black populations (McDaniel & Bashi, 1997). Based on the concepts raised by this scholarship, scholars should pursue new findings of non-Black immigrant populations' relationship to anti-Black racism. Specifically, in what ways do non-Black immigrant populations perpetuate anti-Black racism in the United States, and in what ways are racialized immigrant populations harmed by anti-Black racism.

Others have applied these frameworks to understand how certain racial divides will prevail and even widen as the populations of racialized immigrant groups grow. The author argues that the alienation of Black Americans will prevail, and non-Black Americans will assimilate into whiteness. The author further asserts that the Black/non-Black divide is the best way to approach race studies. The author pulls evidence from the 1999-2000 Lilly Survey of American Attitudes and Friendships, which includes survey data from Black, white, Latino, and Asian Americans, as

well as the racial attitudes of respondents towards non-Black groups. Here, Yancey recycled the assimilation model, pulling markers of assimilation such as residential, marital, and self-identification, making determinations on racialized communities' proximity to whiteness (Yancey, 2003). Yancey's formulates assimilating into whiteness being predicating on the alienation of native racial minorities in the host country, such as Black Americans. Alienation as whiteness or to maintain the dominant culture exists in the home country's racial ideology as well. However, the scholarship does not go very far in exploring concepts of whiteness in the home country to understand immigrant populations' relationship to whiteness in the host country.

Roth and Kim take a transnational approach to understand the construction of racial ideology within immigrant populations by identifying processes creating prejudices in home and host countries. The authors conduct two sets of in-depth studies, Dominicans and Koreans, interviewing both immigrants and those who reside in the home state to understand how racial attitudes are shared through the processes of immigration, transnationalism, and globalization. (Roth & Kim 2013). Research has also been done to examine how anti-Black racial ideologies in the United States are circulated back to the immigrant-sending community via social ties held between U.S. immigrants and non-migrants, who have never left their home. The concept of racial remittances refers to the transmission of racial ideologies across national borders. This conception of developing race ideologies supports the Black/non-Black divide (Zamora, 2016). The existing scholarship acknowledges that immigrants do not arrive in the host country as blank slates. Rather they carry over internalized racial ideologies from the host country. However, much of this research does not present a thorough examination of the home country ideology itself. Exploring the roots of home country racial ideology would provide key insights into understanding how immigrant populations negotiate their racial identity.

Where assimilationist theory has obscured or misrepresented, social race constructionist frameworks have found opportunities to identify and interrogate deeply embedded white supremacy and anti-Black racism. For these reasons, scholars have introduced social race construction to immigration studies in the direct critique of assimilationist theory. The social race construction framework creates new opportunities for exploring and explaining immigrant populations' racialization, their social trajectories, and other trends among immigrant populations. For example, studying the proliferation of the Black-non-Black racial binary, the concept of honorary whiteness, and the transnational nature of racial ideology and identity. The existing literature within this field focuses on the systematic forces that shape immigrants' social trajectories and describes their racialized social experiences. More recently, new research has applied the social race construction framework to study immigrants' perceptions of their racialized experiences in the host country and how they lead to individual and community level identity-building. In the next section, I observe the research built out of the social race construction lens being applied to immigrant populations of Middle Eastern background in the United States and focusing on the formation of the Middle Eastern American racial identity.

Formation of the Middle Eastern American Racial Identity

Social race construction theory can be applied to explore the racialization of growing immigrant populations and how their positionality is shaped as fairly new fixtures in the U.S. racial hierarchy. Many of these immigrant populations arrived in large numbers from the Global South after the passing of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. The Middle Eastern American community is one of the populations expanding the Black-white racial paradigm. Conditional citizenship, Islamophobia as racism, racialized political shocks, and relating proximity to white

and Black racial categorization have emerged as themes in the scholarship seeking to understand the Middle Eastern racial identity and the establishment of the position of Middle Easterners in the U.S. racial hierarchy.

Reaching the end of the 2016 election season, Moroccan American author Laila Lalami reflects on the reactive discourse responding to Muslim Americans or Americans assumed to be Muslim because of their political dissent. The author reflects that bigotry and accusations of disloyalty and even terrorism target Muslim Americans (or those communities perceived as Muslim Americans) that voice the injustice of policies and rhetoric attacking their community (Lalami, 2016). The author considers these reactions to be a feature of Muslim Americans' "conditional citizenship" which is granted only by their service and silence. They are constantly surveilled and cast with suspicion and there are constructed limits to their ability to vocalize dissent. Lalami identifies the process of racial marginalization for Middle Eastern Americans coming into form by racialized policy, media scrutiny, and overt public prejudice (Lalami, 2020). Lalami's insights are meaningful because she pulls from her experience as not only a Moroccan American immigrant but also as a woman and a Muslim. The Middle East features incredibly diverse populations of race, ethnicity, cultures, and religions. Future scholarship should prioritize seeking out the perceptions and experiences of Middle Easterners who hold intersectional identities. The presence of intersectional identities can bring new clarity to identity negotiation in Middle Eastern Americans' identity-building.

Moustafa Bayoumi, acclaimed author and journalist, collected narratives that describe Islam's racialization in the United States. His book, *How Does it Feel to Be a Problem?* follows the story of seven Arab and Muslim American youth in Brooklyn, post 9/11. This book illustrates Arab-Americans' relationship with the U.S. racial hierarchy and its reset after September 11. After

that moment in history, Arab Americans shifted from a somewhat ambiguous middleman minority to being positioned in an experience closer to that of Black Americans- surveilled, detained, and fighting for their civil rights. Bayoumi identifies the events, policy, and rhetoric surrounding 9/11 to have fundamentally shaped Arab American's racial identity (Bayoumi, 2008). Still, all the interviewees in this book grew up after 9/11. This period marked a fundamental repositioning of Middle Eastern Americans in the U.S. racial hierarchy, but it is important to contextualize the lived experience before this time. It is crucial to capture immigrants' experiences and perceptions before this significant event and events like it to understand how these events transformed the racial identity and racialized experiences.

The events of 9/11 and the War on Terror have played a significant role in shaping Middle Eastern American's racial identity. However, there is evidence that Middle Eastern Americans contended with racial identity before 2001 and even before 1965. Erik Love, author of *Islamophobia and Racism in America*, describes cultural Islamophobia before 2001 as racial animus in pop culture of the Middle East and Middle Easterners. The media's representations were motivated by political events such as the OAPEC oil embargoes and the Iran Hostage Crisis. Terrorist attacks perpetrated by individuals or organizations of Middle Eastern origin in the eighties popularized the terrorist stereotype and suspicions cast towards Middle Eastern Americans 20 years before 9/11. For example, the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 by Libyan nationals, heightened violence by Hezbollah, or the hijacking of an American Cruise Ship by the Palestinian Liberation Front (Love, 2017, 86-88). Several scholars have traced the construction of Middle Eastern American racial identity to the naturalization era, where immigrants of Middle Eastern origin had to prove they were white to gain U.S. citizenship (Tehranian 2009, Beydoun 2013 and 2018, Maghbouleh 2017). This evidence and arguments introduced in these hearings resulted in

random, arbitrary determinations of Middle Easterners' racial identity. Though these hearings also defined and redefined whiteness to exclude most Middle Eastern Americans by clarifying proximity to whiteness as non-Muslim, Caucasian lineage, and wealthy in most cases where plaintiffs "successfully" petitioned their white identity. The "white by law, brown by popular opinion" racial identity of Middle Eastern Americans had been established for Middle Eastern Americans for some time before 2001 (Maghbouleh, 2017, 24).

Khaled A. Beydoun explores the roots of Islamophobia in the United States to understand the rise in anti-Muslim rhetoric in policy, media, and individual sentiment post 9/11. The text gives legal and historical context to contemporary Islamophobia as the newest interpretation of American orientalism. The author's definition of Islamophobia broken into private, structural, and dialectical Islamophobia identifies the vast, multi-faceted influence of Islamophobia racializing Middle Eastern Americans. Furthermore, Beydoun gives a historical account of Islamophobia in U.S. law and policy that predates 9/11. Historically, Middle Easterners in the United States had to distance themselves from Islam as part of their case to appeal to whiteness, a precondition to citizenship in the United States in the early 20th century (Beydoun, 2018).

In the book, *Race and Islamophobia,* Erik Love, focuses on the dissonance between Middle Eastern American's legal whiteness and their social experience. Love's presentation of the Middle Eastern American identity as a racial paradox where legal whiteness exempts Middle Easterners from civil protections, yet this group faces increasing racial discrimination because they fall outside of the limits of social whiteness. The racial dilemma explains the multiple populations facing discrimination due to racializing Islam and rising Islamophobia, yet there is no racially distinct category to protect and define in law. It seems that Islamophobia is a driving force racializing the Middle Eastern American community. Yet, they only have access to protection from

discrimination through claims of religious discrimination rather than racial discrimination (Love, 2017). Scholars Khaled Beydoun and Erik Love have presented invaluable findings on the historical origins and modern forces of Islamophobia in the United States and studied its relationship to racializing Muslim and non-Muslim Middle Eastern Americans. These scholars pull from history, legal scholarship, and civil advocacy to deconstruct Islamophobia as racism. Further research should focus on how immigrant populations targeted by anti-Muslim racism perceive their experiences of dual racial and religious discrimination. More specifically, it would be interesting to understand to what extent immigrants identify anti-Muslim sentiments as a factor in the racial discrimination they perceive and how they negotiate their racial identity to accommodate racialized religious discrimination.

Some scholars use Islamophobia as a jumping-off point for exploring geopolitical factors shaping the Arab American racial identity. Racial construction theories and the impact of "political shocks" in social movements merge to develop an understanding of the Arab American racial identity to be formed out of instances and civil advocacy responses to "racialized political shocks. Zarrugh's insight on the formation of the Arab American racial identity reiterates understanding this identity outside of the boundaries of legal whiteness. The notion of instances of "racialized political shock" reclassifying the U.S. racial hierarchy explains the fluid shifting of the Middle Eastern racial identity over the white/non-white color line (Zarrugh, 2016). The concept of racialized political shock explores Middle Eastern racial identity in the western imagination, inspiring racial animus from political terror.

Hamid Dabashi, an Iranian Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia, builds on Beydoun and Zarrugh's claims with a critical examination of immigrant "comprador intellectuals" play in facilitating global domination of American imperialism. Dabashi

extends Fanon's insights in *White Faces, Black Masks* the contemporary context of the American War on Terror by utilizing Edward Said's notion of the 'intellectual exile' to expose migrants who build careers in the diaspora as an "imperial mouthpiece" with the assumed authority to cover their home countries. Dabashi also reveals the flip side of "racialized political shocks" as "collective amnesia" when understanding who is labeled "terrorist" and what power is masked as "liberator." Dabashi points the finger back to the imperial powers' whose foreign interventions created the destabilization and radicalization which fostered terrorism originating in the Middle East (Dabashi, 2011).

Dabashi critically speaks to the implications of Middle Eastern racial identity at the individual and community level (Dabashi, 2011). That being said, Dabashi primarily focuses his conversation on the Middle Eastern racial identity among a community of intellectual elites. His findings may not apply to Middle Eastern immigrant and refugees' experiences outside of the academic and cultural spheres he focuses on. Therefore, his conclusions may not apply to the everyday experiences of the majority of Middle Eastern Americans.

Dabashi's analysis of Middle Easterners' racialization is driven by "brown being the new Black" (Dabashi, 2011, 20). Similar to Dabashi's claim of "brown being the new Black," multiple interviewees in Bayoumi's book refer to themselves and their Muslim and Middle

Eastern communities as the "new Black" (Bayoumi, 2008, 2). This comparison describes the observable shifting down of Middle Eastern Americans on the U.S. racial hierarchy. These analyses ignore rather than acknowledge racialization predicated by transnational anti-Blackness. Middle Eastern racialization is preconditioned by a racial hierarchical structure that always places Black at the bottom (Bashi, 1998, 964). Bonilla identified Middle Eastern American racial categorization to be tethering between "honorary white" and "collective Black" when

acknowledging the community facing increased racial discrimination (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 946). There are similarities between the Black and Middle Eastern experiences in the United States, such as racial profiling and surveillance. However, drawing these similarities is only the beginning of identifying Middle Eastern Americans' racialization, which no way replaces or minimizes the brutal anti-Black racism underlying the society that is racializing Middle Eastern Americans.

Neda Maghbouleh further describes the dissonance between legal whiteness and their social experience in *The Limits of Whiteness*. Her book provides a deeper understanding of how Iranian Americans experience the limits of legal and social proximity to whiteness in home, school, and other everyday contexts through in-depth interviews with 80 Iranian American youth. Interviews alongside an examination of the history of Middle Easterners' classification of legal whiteness in the U.S. show that Middle Eastern Americans are caught in a conflicting identity of "legal racial invisibility" and "everyday racial hyper-visibility." This language refers to the contradiction in Iranian and Middle Eastern Americans being legally classified as white, despite their racialized social experience in the United States. It is in this contradiction, where "Iranian Americans came to be categorized as white de jure, to explore if they are socially incorporated as white de facto, and to assess what this case tells us about how whiteness operates" reveals unanswered questions in theories of assimilation that do not explain Iranian American's discrimination and alienation from U.S. mainstream society (Maghbouleh, 2017, 8). Maghbouleh stakes her findings in social race construction theory, defining race as "a master status tied to group oppression and domination" and "assimilation as a site of racial struggle and accounts for U.S. nativism as a battleground where 'in-between' groups are browned" (Maghbouleh, 2017, 6). This book captures aspects of Iranian American's relationship to whiteness and the construction of their racial identity in the United States. Maghbouleh pulls knowledge from 80 interviews with 2nd and

1.5 generation Iranian Americans. However, this population excludes 1st generation and older Iranian Americans and those who have lived in the United States for a longer time. Many interviewees described second-hand information about Iran's racial ideology that they learned from their families and communities. I believe it is integral to gain insights from 1st generation Iranian Americans who can speak first-hand to their perceptions of Iran's racial ideology. It is also useful to speak to older Iranian Americans and Iranian Americans who have resided in the United States for a long time because they have different perceptions and experiences with race than Iranian American youth that have grown up post 9/11 with ideas of race and racial identity that have not always been widely accepted in the United States, or by immigrant communities.

Empirical research has also been gathered on how Middle Easterners respond to their racialization and reformulate their understandings of their racial identity. Using in-depth interviews with naturalized U.S. citizens and immigrants and autoethnographic data, the author examines the stigma management strategies Middle Eastern Americans deploy, particularly in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks. The interviews are conducted using interpretive practice and accounting narration. Data collection took the form of "active interviewing," where the author engaged with interviewees by acknowledging shared heritages and experiences. Maghbouleh draws empirical evidence from racial formation theory. The author utilizes interview data with Iranian Americans to understand the population's ambiguous relationship with whiteness on a micro-level. By unpacking everyday personal interactions with interviewees through the application of "reflected race", racial identity could be understood as illegibility amid racial appraisal, splitting from the white U.S. psychosomatic norm, and lumping other non-white racialized groups (Maghbouleh, 2019). Once again, I apply a similar in-depth interview style of these scholars. However, I am interested in seeing greater diversity in age, generation, and time

spent in the United States among Iranian American respondents. Perhaps, younger generations are more open with a discussion of race, but they do not necessarily reflect older generations of Iranian American immigrants' perspectives.

John Tehranian draws in all the factors racializing Middle Easterners to understand the shaping of the Iranian American racial identity. His book, *Whitewashed*, is written in response to the "Middle Eastern question," while the conflict in the Middle Eastern region intensifies and western intervention and Islamophobia embolden heightened discrimination against Middle Eastern Americans, the target of discrimination is racially elusive and is exempt from civil law which defines them as white. He explains how American constructions of Middle Eastern racial identity originate from two centuries ago, the shift in perceptions of the Middle Easterner from friendly foreigner to enemy alien after 9/11. "Focusing on the contemporary immigration debate, the War on Terrorism, media portrayals of Middle Easterners, and the processes of creating racial stereotypes", Tehranian argues that," despite its many successes, the modern civil rights movement has not done enough to protect the liberties of Middle Eastern Americans" (Tehranian, 2009, 3). The paradox of Middle Eastern Racial Classification, where the history of naturalization of Middle Easterners was successfully performing whiteness. The concepts of 'covering', defined as performing whiteness by downplaying features of oneself that are ethnically or racially distinctive and selective racialization, defined as the erasure of all positively portrayed Middle Easterners in media and all negative figures that are Middle Eastern oversaturate the mediascape (Tehranian, 2009, 121). The consequence is maybe achieving less discrimination on an individual level is at the expense of losing legitimacy for protecting the community from racial discrimination. Scholars such as Tehranian and Maghbouleh examine the dissonance between Iranian American's legal white identity and social racialized identity. They mainly focus on the consequences of claiming

whiteness when a community does not have the benefits of white privileges, such as a lack of civil rights protections from racial discrimination. It would also be interesting to understanding how the dissonance between social and legal racial identities fosters community disillusionment and identity renegotiation.

There is a rich body of scholarship studying the legal, historical, and political origins of Middle Eastern American communities' racialization and how their racial identity in the United States has shifted over time. However, less research has been done focusing on the perspectives of Middle Eastern Americans on the ground interacting with racializing forces. In my research, I seek to exhibit Middle Eastern American immigrants' awareness and agency in navigating these forces and negotiating their own racial identity on an individual and community level. In my research, I also focus on societal factors within the home country that also influence immigrant's navigation and negotiation. In the following section, I will provide a brief political context and history of Iran to understand some of the drivers of Iranian American immigration that shaped the establishment of the Iranian American community. This next section serves as a foundation, not only for understanding factors racializing Iranian American immigrants in the United States but how Iranian racial ideology has formed their racial identity before arriving in the United States.

Iranian American Community: Political context and History

In this section, I will explore the political context surrounding the history of immigration from Iran to the United States. This stream of immigration is best described in three major waves, organized as pre-1979 Islamic Revolution, post 1979 Revolution up to 2009 Green Movement, and 2009 Green Movement till today. Before the 1979 revolution, Iran was a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary democracy and a popularly elected prime minister. Shah

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi held power until he was overthrown as part of the 1979 revolution. The 1979 revolution was a shift in government and constitutional drafting in Iran from a constitutional monarchy to the Islamic Republic. In 2009, there was a revitalization in civilian political organizing when swarths of Iranians participated in the 2008 election, and then in subsequent protests against alleged fraud in the re-election of President Ahmadinejad. I consider these three separate waves of immigration from Iran to the United States because they mark significant political events primarily in Iran that motivated immigration leaving Iran and shaped the perception of Americans receiving Iranian immigrants. A brief political and historical review of these three periods is useful for understanding the contexts in which large populations of Iranian Americans arrived in the United States.

Before 1979

The first recorded Iranian immigrants to arrive in the United States came in the 1920s. Throughout the decades till the 1979 revolution, a little more than a dozen thousand Iranians immigrated to the United States. A large majority of these Iranian immigrants were not families, but foreign exchange students. At the time many Iranian students were actively encouraged to study abroad as part of Pahlavi's modernization project. The exceptionally high number of Iranians studying in the United States is in part to the 1949 bilateral Commission for Cultural Exchange between Iran and the United States. According to the Institute of International Education's annual foreign student census, Iranian students made up 9% of all the foreign students in the country in 1975, making them the largest international student population at the time (PAAIA, 2014, 4). The United States was the most popular study abroad for Iranian students at the time. However, by the late 1970s, the Iran Hostage Crisis and 1979 Islamic revolution raised tensions between Iran and

the United States. The consequences of strained diplomatic relations included limiting access to study abroad programs in the United States for Iranian students (Trines, 2017). The United States government launched the Iran Control Program which interrogated the immigration status of about 60,000 international students from Iran (*Iranian immigrants: Revolution and Immigration*, 2015). About 7,000 of these students were found to have visa violations, and the U.S. government did conduct deportations during the early-revolutionary period. All new visas were suspended and revoked the visas of all-nonimmigrant visitors from Iran (PAAIA 2014: 8). At that time Additionally, a significant portion of these international students were unable to return to Iran due to the political turbulence, and became permanent residents in the United States, forming the basis of the Iranian American community (PAAIA, 2014, 4).

It is also worthwhile to understand the political affairs within Iran before 1979 to give context and foreshadowing to the Islamic Revolution and the next political era of Iran. In the fifties, Iran's democratically elected prime minister was Mohammed Mossadegh. Mossadegh's platform advocated for the nationalization of Iran's resources, including most notably, the British-owned Anglo-Persian Oil Company. Mossadegh was able to gain control of Iran's oil industry from Britain, despite Britain having Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in their pockets (Secor: 2016, 11). In retaliation, U.S. and British intelligence agencies collaborated to overthrow the nationalist Mossadegh government and reinstate the ruling power under Pahlavi. The U.S.-orchestrated military coup was done in the interest of protecting western assets, at the detriment of Iran's democracy and its people (PAAIA, 2014). Pahlavi ushered in a new era of westernization, reflected in foreign policy as well as domestic projects. Pahlavi was unsurprisingly, an ally to western powers, signing the Consortium Agreement in 1954, which gave the U.S., British, and French oil companies 40% ownership of Iran's nationalized oil industry for the next twenty-five years (CFR

Timeline). Additional agreements were made regarding nuclear technology (CFR Timeline). Domestically, the Shah launched various industrialization and ideological projects aimed at "modernizing" Iran. This wave of reforms is known as the "white revolution". During this time the shah also enforced political repression of his opposers by banning certain parties and organizations and bolstering his secret police force, SAVAK. While advertised as a modernizing project, the White Revolution was a thinly veiled attempt to legitimize Pahlavi's authority as well as reform Iran in ways that pleased his government's western allies (Ansari, 2001).

It is useful to take a closer look at some of the ideological projects spearheaded at this time. Most importantly, the conflation of Iranian ethnonational identity and the concept of the "Aryan race". The term Aryan was created by French Orientalist, Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron. Aryan is considered synonymous with Indo-European, and the evidence given to support Iranian's Aryan identity is a geographic location and Farsi being a related branch to the Indo-European language tree. A related myth is the one according to which "Iran" means the "land of Aryans." This myth was propagated by Max Müller, who claimed in 1862 that the term *airyanem vaejah* found in the Avesta is the ancestor of "Iran" and means the "Aryan expanse," and remains contested by scholars to this day. The origins of Iran's Aryaye identity were developed by Orientalist scholars and race scientists and wielded as an ideological tool for the Pahlavi government. During the Pahlavi era, the "Aryaye" identity was embedded into the Iranian psyche in part to information campaigns and educational curriculum (Zia-Ebrahami, 2010). Supposedly uniting all Iranians under one ethnonational identity also justified persecuting minority groups in Iran (Shams, 2012). Though today, race science has been debunked, the legacy of Iranian's Aryaye identity and its consequences has remained steadfast in Iranian's identity, despite its arbitrary origins. I will further discuss the modern-day implications of the Aryan myth in the results section.

Returning to the Iranian American immigrants of this period, it is also noteworthy to mention their reception and integration into American society at this time. Iranian students who could afford to pursue a professional career during Iran's industrialization reforms took advantage of the opportunity for higher education abroad at a time where Iran's universities did not have the capacity to support a major shift in the workforce to technical fields (PAAIA, 2014, 4). This population had relatively more capital, higher education, and income achievements, and broader networks compared to later waves of Iranian immigrants. This population was mostly made up of student and economic migrants, rather than political refugees. At the same time, the immigrant population of Middle Eastern origin, and specifically Iranian heritage, was considerably small before the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. Also, before the Iran Hostage Crisis, Iran was still an ally of the United States. For the most part, immigrants from Iran were perceived by the native American population with indifference, curiosity, and maybe the blanket nativist, anti-immigrant discrimination that was commonplace in the mid-20th century United States. The absence of political racialization combined with greater access to resources shaped this wave of Iranian immigrant's experience in the United States to be one of significantly less hostility and racial animosity compared to the experience of Iranian Americans in later decades.

1979 Islamic Revolution

Opposition towards Mohammad Reza Shah grew due to corruption in the royal family, playing into western influences on Iran's policies, and increased hostilities towards political adversaries, such as banning the Tudeh (Iranian Communist) party and alleged torture of political dissidents. His opposition spanned across religious and political lines. Secular leftists attacked him for conniving with imperialist powers, while Islamists and the Shiite clergy viewed his modernization

efforts as an attack on traditional, Islamic values. Political repression intensified as the resistance was viewed as undermining the legitimacy of the Shah's rule. For example, the Shah banned street meetings and ordered the arrest of opposition leaders after a fire in a cinema in Abadan killed four hundred women and children, and public allegations blamed the local police chief who was also involved in opening fire on civilian activists in Qom. In January 1978 forces of political tension culminate and erupt into the beginning of the Iranian revolution, which would last for over a year. The revolution was ignited when the military, under martial law called for by the Shah, opened fire on a demonstration in Jaleh Square, Tehran. Thousands of protestors were injured, and at least one hundred people died. This event would go on to be known as Black Friday, or the Jaleh Square massacre (Abrahamian, 2008, 158-159). On the brink of being overthrown and nearing the consequences of his conspiring, Pahlavi fled Iran in January of 1979. After over a decade in exile, Shiite cleric and critic of Pahlavi, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned to Iran in February of 1979.

In November of 1979, hundreds of Iranian university students occupy the U.S. embassy in Tehran and take hostage its staff. Their actions were motivated by suspicions that the U.S. government was planning to overthrow the new political leadership of Iran, similar to America's involvement in the 1953 Coup (Abrahamian, 2008, 168). These students were organized under Students Following the Imam's Line and aligned themselves with the Islamic left revolutionaries. Their efforts were in response to Pahlavi Shah being accepted to the United States the previous month for medical treatment (Secor: 2016, 39). This enraged the Iranian public, as well as political leaders such as Khomeini, who demanded Pahlavi be returned to Iran to stand trial, (which meant to face his death). Khomeini did not order the students' actions but publicly gave them his blessing. The Iran Hostage Crisis lasted 444 days and ended in January 1981. The international

community, but especially the United States, did not see the hostage crisis as only a demand to extradite the shah, it was a foreign attack on the United States. U.S. foreign officials stationed at Tehran had warned of such a foreign security threat should the U.S. accept Pahlavi, but Washington chose to heed their cautioning at the time, considering it a return of service to someone who had served them significantly over the years (Secor: 2016, 32). With the shah out of power, Iran and the United States were no longer allies.

The fall of Pahlavi's rule raised Khomeini to power, who had become a symbol of opposition leading up to the revolution. The Iran Hostage Crisis also furthered the rise of Islamic political leadership for the standing affront of western influence in Iran, rather than the secular leftists (though the siege was orchestrated by a student group, and not Shiite leaders). In April of 1979, a popular referendum ratified the new constitution establishing theocratic governance in Iran, with Ayatollah Khomeini now presiding as the supreme leader (Secor: 2016, 40). The instatement of the Islamic Republic of Iran ushered in an era of even more severe political repression and chaos as Shiite religious leadership now wielded political authority greater than any shah under the system of constitutional monarchy agenda (Abrahamian, 2008, 164). The redrafting of Iran's legal code had detrimental consequences. A new system of governance, *Velayet-e Faqeh* (theory of Guardianship judiciary), justified Shiite guardianship of political and religious authority through a supreme leader that dictates military, judiciary, and clerical leadership (Aarabi, 2019). The implementation of *Velayet-e Faqeh* enforced government action in accordance with the principles of the shari'a, as interpreted by a small number of Shiite authorities who also had a vested interest in protecting their power and their agenda (Abrahamian, 2008, 162).

Under the new constitution, all citizens, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, and gender, were recognized to have basic equal rights and freedoms. However, the democratic ideals and individual

liberties formally written did not align with the new reality under the Islamic Republic. Women were stripped of their individual liberties in every facet of life. The redrafted constitution formally recognized and protected listed minority religious and ethnic minorities (Abrahamian, 2008, 166). However, some communities were left unrecognized, and therefore unprotected, by the constitution, and were criminalized and persecuted by the Islamic Republic under accusations of political agendas that threaten government power (IHRDC, 2011). Failing to claim Islam or another recognized religion on official documents bars individuals from education and employment opportunities. Active persecution forced numerous groups of scholars, activists, professionals, artists into exile as alleged threats to Islamic values. To this day, Iran stands as an Islamic Republic, and the Iranian people are subject to political repression, criminalization, and persecution under theocratic power.

> "Despite generous guarantees to individual and social rights, the constitution included ominous Catch-22s: 'All laws and regulations must conform to the principles of Islam'; 'The Guardian Council has the authority to determine these principles'; and 'All legislation must be sent to the Guardian Council for detailed examination. The Guardian Council must ensure that the contents of the legislation do not contravene Islamic precepts and the principles of the Constitution'" (Abrahamian, 2008, 167).

Iran felt its isolation, or what some called abandonment, from its foreign allies strongest in September 1980. Observing the instability in Iran due to the revolution's events, Iraq seized the opportunity to invade. The hostage crisis in Tehran was still active, and there was no immediate outcry from Washington against Soviet-backed Iraq (Secor: 2016, 42). Iran's forces regained the invaded city of Khorramshahr, but the war against Iraq prevailed. At this time, Basij was established (and would become an arm of the present day Islamic Revolutionary Guard). The Basiji militia consisted of civilian fighters encouraged to sacrifice themselves on behalf of the new government by Khomeini. They consisted primarily of young men and teenage boys from poor,

rural backgrounds. The Basij “made up fully 84 percent of Iran’s fighting forces and 43 percent of the country’s 190,000 combat dead by decade’s end” (Secor: 2016, 82). An estimated half a million Iranian and Iraqi troops died over the course of the war, as well as at least 100,000 civilians. The war lasted until late August of 1988 when Iran accepted UN-brokered ceasefire, after almost a decade of carnage. Billions of dollars were expended by both sides, and billions more in damages to oil reserves and civilian settlements were caused. Neither side gained land, and neither country achieved their desire to come out of the war as the dominant power in the Persian Gulf region. The war burned Iran, which was suffocating under the smoke of political instability, isolation from all allies, and unrelenting sanctions (Secor: 2016, 83).

While the United States avoided its former ally in the international sphere, it by no means was ignoring the political situation in Iran. Iran continued to be considered a high-priority foreign security threat with enormous potential influence by its geopolitical positioning. Iran-United States' foreign relations were re-engaged at the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war. Iran required weapons, and the United States could provide new, American-made arms. The Iran arms deal was conducted in secrecy when Iran was still supposedly under an arms embargo by the United States (CFR). Iran was supplied arms through Israel, in exchange for Iran assisting in the release of American hostages by Iranian-supported Hezbollah in Lebanon (Secor: 2016, 87). The Reagan administration also benefited from the arms deal, by procuring the secret funds to interfere in the newly instated government of another global south country rising from a 1979 revolution. Washington was diverting the funds to support the civilian-killing Contras in Nicaragua (when congress opposed further support), a counterrevolutionary force against the leftist Sandinista Junta of the National Reconstruction Government. The United States sold thousands of missiles to Iran until the deal ended in 1986. The Reagan administration funneled millions of dollars to the Contras

(Brown). The Iran-Contra affair built on the CIA-orchestrated 1951 coup overthrowing Mossadegh, making the obvious more clear, western intervention in Iran will only occur where there is western interest.

Iran was fundamentally changed by these political catastrophes. No party was more severely assaulted and victimized than the Iranian people themselves. These tumultuous years caused a significant flood of emigration departing Iran. In 1988, the World Refugee Survey reported Iran to be tenth among countries with the highest source of refugees" (PAAIA: 2014, 5). There are several stark differences between this wave of Iranian immigrants compared to those that arrived in the mid-20th century. First, Iranian immigrants after 1979 there was a considerable increase in families leaving Iran. Whereas before, primarily students and young professionals immigrated to the United States. Though there were many families, there was also a considerable portion of these new arrivals who were single, young men evading military conscription and the lack of future prospects in post-revolutionary Iran. Second, a significant number of these Iranians were arriving in the United States as refugees who had escaped political and religious persecution in Iran. Due to these first two differences, this new group of Iranian immigrants was also more economically diverse and did not match the considerably high educational and income achievements of the earlier wave of young students and professionals.

> "They were diverse in their religious, political, and ethnic background and their reasons for leaving Iran varied. They included families associated with the previous regime as members of the government, military, and owners of large businesses. This second wave also included a disproportionately high number of ethnic and religious minorities such as Sunni Muslims, Christians, Jews, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians, all of whom left in fear of religious persecution. The new immigrants also included political dissidents, as well as displaced cultural workers such as writers, journalists, artists, and musicians" (PAAIA: 2014, 5).

The largest influx of Iranian Americans arrived directly after the revolution between 1979-1982 (PAAIA: 2014, 6). In the following years, a steady stream of Iranians would arrive in the

United States to escape the instability and turmoil of the war and the new Islamic regime. In 1979, there were just under 50,000 Iranians residing in the United States. Five years later, by 1984, this number had almost doubled to a total of 105,991 immigrants. For the next twenty years following the revolution, approximately 10,000-20,000 Iranians would be admitted to the United States every year. By 1999, there were over 300,000 Iranians residing in the United States (Bozorgmehr, 2007: 469-471). These numbers reflect the number of new arrivals from Iran, but don't necessarily reflect the number of permanent residents since many Iranians first came to the United States with temporary visas for travel or study abroad.

Reforms to U.S. immigration law in the second half of the 20th century accommodated the increase in immigration from Iran, as well as the increase in permanent residency. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 removed the quota system for immigration based on national origin. The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 allowed thousands of undocumented Iranians to attain permanent residency status. Furthermore, IRCA also introduced a family-sponsorship program that allowed greater family settlement in the Iranian American community with the sponsorship of families and relatives still abroad (PAAIA: 2014, 5).

In the United States, the influx of Iranian immigrants was not necessarily met with sympathy. These new immigrants were the target of anti-Iranian discrimination propagated by the Iran Hostage Crisis, the severing of public U.S.-Iran relations, and the unfolding of the Islamic Republic of Iran from the 1979 Revolution during and Iran-Iraq war. Erik Love, who wrote extensively on the political events that racialized Middle Easterners, said about the Iran Hostage Crisis, "It is difficult to overstate how much this national crisis contributed to the shift away from the Middle Eastern 'oil sheik' stereotype toward the 'terrorist' stereotype (Love, 2017, 87). Iranians did not only face prejudice from individually acting Americans, but there were also

outcries for biased immigration policies against immigrants of Iranian origin. Though specifically, anti-Iranian discrimination subsided in the years after the Iran Hostage Crisis, policies and rhetoric surrounding the War on Terror revitalized discrimination against Iranian Americans. In the early 2000s, post 9/11 legislation targeting individuals originating from Muslim-majority countries changed the social and legal landscape for Iranians residing in the United States. In the United States, over 1000 Iranians were detained by Immigration and Nationality Services, and many were deported due to visa violations. This occurred under new legislation targeting Iranians and other nationalities such as Enhanced Border Security and Visa Reform Act and NSEERS. The impact of this legislation on Iranian Americans was eerily similar to the "Iran Control Program" around the time of the Iran Hostage Crisis. An increase in reports of personal and employment-based discrimination drove the Iranian American community to organize for their civil rights, and many advocacy groups were established at the time. These include the National Iranian American Council (NIAC), the Iranian American Political Action Committee (IAPAC), and the Iranian American Bar Association (IABA), among others (Bozorgmehr 2007, 476). In the decades following the 1979 revolution, the Iranian American community grew substantially and established itself as a fixed immigrant population in the United States.

2009 Green Movement

Although Iran had no part in the events of 9/11, Iran continued to be scapegoated by United States foreign policy rhetoric surrounding the War on Terror. President George W. Bush designated Iran as part of the "axis of evil". Iranian Americans faced some of the hysteria and hostility directed at communities from Muslim-majority countries of origin. As mentioned above, Iranian Americans organized themselves to protect their community from discrimination and

promote Iranian American issues. Still, in the early 2000s, biased immigration policy did limit the number of Iranian immigrants to less than 10,000 per year (PAAIA, 2014, 10).

The annual number of Iranian arrivals to the United States rose again around 2009. Iranians in Iran had been living under intense political repression in the subsequent years following the revolution. Censorship, harassment by morality squads, street militias, unjust imprisonment, torture, and executions were all commonplace consequences for breaking from the rigid social and political roles the republic mandated on its people. Yet, almost thirty years after the revolution, the Iranian populace defied a repressive government again. In June 2008, Iran held its presidential election. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was up for reelection and facing the probable outcome of losing the presidency due to his administration's flagrant human rights offenses, catastrophic mishandling of Iran's economy, and failure to deliver on the 2005 election promises. Former prime minister Mir Hossein Mousavi and Shiite cleric Mehdi Karroubi both ran on reformist agendas against Ahmadinejad. These candidate's platform's ignited unprecedented political participation and advocacy from the disillusioned Iranian public. A record high voter turnout of 39 million voters participated in. the 2008 election. Thus, it came as a shock when the election outcome was returned by the interior ministry as 63 percent of votes to Ahmadinejad, 34 percent to Mousavi. The fraudulence of the election outcome was blatant. The speed of the vote count, the observed voter tampering the day of the election by the revolutionary guard, anomalous voting patterns among various sectors of the populace, Mousavi's incredible loss, Karroubi being extremely below his forecasted turnout- from all sides it was clear that Ahmadinejad did not win by popular vote (Secor 2016: 405-415).

Leading up to the election outcome announcement and following, Iran was under digital and physical lockdown (Secor 2016: 410-411). Demonstrations immediately broke out, becoming

larger and more violent as riot police met aggravated civilians. Demonstrations around the world were organized in solidarity with Iranian protestors demanding a fair election and removal of Ahmadinejad. This reawakening of Iranian political activity and the series of protests after the rigged election would be known as the Green Movement, in memory of Mossadegh and continuing the legacy reform movement, advocated for change through peace and democracy (Milani: 2010, 1). The fallout of the civil unrest and worsening life prospects in Iran, formed another exodus of Iranians abroad, many settling among the established Iranian American community.

In the present day, Iranian Americans are considered a "high status" immigrant community that achieves income, education, and residential settlements attainments higher than the many immigrants and native populations in the United States (Bozorgmehr 2007: 473). Based on these measures, the Iranian American community is considered to have achieved an "honorary white" among U.S. society (Zarrugh, 2016, 2726). Yet, the community faces a racialized social experience in the United States marked by public prejudice, media misrepresentation, and targeted law and policy due to their national origin. It is at this crossroads that I seek to understand the construction of the Iranian American racial identity and its impact on this immigrant population's position in the U.S. racial hierarchy.

Year	Iranian Immigrants admitted that year	Total Iranian Immigrants in U.S.	Year	Iranian Immigrants admitted that year	Total Iranian Immigrants in U.S.
1960	429	3459	1987	14426	152993
1961	471	3630	1988	15246	168239
1962	601	4231	1989	21243	189482
1963	705	4936	1990	24977	214459
1964	754	5690	1991	19659	234118
1965	804	6494	1992	13233	247351
1966	1085	7579	1993	14841	262192
1967	1414	8993	1994	11422	273614
1968	1280	10273	1995	9201	282815
1969	1352	11625	1996	11084	293899
1969	1352	11625	1997	9642	303541
1970	1825	13450	1998	7883	311424
1971	2411	15861	1999	7203	318627
1972	3059	18920	2000	8519	327146
1973	2998	21918	2001	10497	337643
1974	2608	24526	2002	13029	350672
1975	2337	26863	2003	7,251	357923
1976	3731	30594	2003	7,251	357923
1977	4261	34855	2004	10,434	368357
1978	5861	40716	2005	13,887	382244
1979	8476	49192	2006	13,947	396191
1980	10410	59602	2007	10,460	406651
1981	11105	70707	2008	13,852	420503
1982	10314	81021	2009	18,553	439056
1983	11163	92184	2010	14,182	453238
1984	13807	105991	2011	14,822	468060
1985	16071	122062	2012	12,916	480976
1986	16505	138567			

Figure 1: Iranian American Immigration (1960-2012), source: (PAAIA, 2014, 3)

Methods

I collected data for this study by conducting in-depth interviews while applying interpretive practice methods. Interpretive practice, as developed by Gubrium and Holstein, focuses on the perspectives of interviewees rather than attempting to make objective interpretations of their experiences (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). Sage Research Methods cites Gubrium and Holstein's interview approach as "active interviews". While I did not collect auto-ethnographic data (applying my personal experiences), I acknowledged my similar background with my interviewees and actively engaged with them on the basis of shared experience. I conducted interviews remotely over Zoom audio and/or video call.

For this study, I interviewed thirteen first generation Iranian Americans. Eligible participants include first-generation Iranian Americans over the age of eighteen and currently residing in the United States. These participants represent a diversity of gender, age, religion, and ethnic background. Participants' time of arrival and years spent in the United States vary greatly, providing insight into the experience of Iranian American immigrants spanning decades.

I recruited my interview subjects from Iranian American community group pages on Telegram and Facebook. I also recruited interviewees through personal references from other interviewees (snowball sampling) and community members. Due to this recruitment process, interviewees from across the United States were eligible to participate, but most participants currently or previously have resided in the Pacific Northwest. Interviews lasted approximately one half to one hour. I conducted the interviews primarily in English and colloquial Persian depending on the interviewee's preference for communication.

For data analysis, I employed a method of qualitative data analysis that honors an exploratory research style. In other words, I looked for patterns and ideas rather than attempted to

test or confirm a hypothesis. After completing the interviews, I hand-transcribed audio recordings and reviewed the transcripts for identifiable patterns and themes. Interview excerpts in the results section of this paper are labeled with a pseudonym in the footnotes.

Immigration Era	Male	Female	Total
Pre-1979 Revolution	1	1	2
Post 1979 Revolution- 2008 Election	-	2	2
2008 Election - Present Day	5	4	9
Total	6	7	13

Figure 2: Participant time of arrival and gender

Age at Arrival	Male	Female	Total
Under 18 years old	1	5	6
18 + years old	5	2	7
Total	6	7	13

Figure 3: Participant age at arrival and gender

Age of Participant	Male	Female	Total
18-25 years old	-	4	4
26-35 years old	4	1	5
35-50 years old	1	-	1
Over 50 years old	1	2	3
Total	6	7	13

Figure 4: Participant age now and gender

Results

In the following section, I present interview data on first-generation Iranian American's reflections on the racial ideology in Iran, as well as individual experiences and perceptions of racism and racial identity in the United States. Both home country racial ideology and experiences and perception of racism in the U.S. shape Iranian American's racial identity. From these interviews, arose several themes including proximity to whiteness, Iranian racial ideology weighted identity, racialized political events/islamophobia as racism, identity in the U.S., and pressure to assimilate. Proximity to whiteness explores Iranian American's identification with whiteness as it relates to the Aryan myth, an aspect of Iranian racial ideology, and statuses of "legal whiteness" and "honorary whiteness" in the United States. These identities proximate Iranian Americans to whiteness, which impacts not only how Iranian Americans identify themselves, but self-identification is formed in distinguishing who does not share this proximity to whiteness. Self-identification in terms of exclusion can be further understood by probing Iranian racial ideology. Weighted identity considers contemporary Iranian identity as a formulation of historic and contemporary "others" that Iranians have defined themselves against. However, the lines of exclusion shift for Iranian American immigrants, their identity based on home country ideology is reformulated in response to experiences in the United States. Iranian Americans' proximity to whiteness is challenged by racialized political events and islamophobia as racism in their social experiences in the United States. Iranian Americans recognize the dissonance between their formal identity (white according to law and historical narrative) and consider new, broader identities that accommodate their shared social experience with other racialized immigrant communities. Lastly, I also examine individuals' social agency in navigating pressures to assimilate to U.S. society to further emphasize awareness in reformulating identity.

Proximity to Whiteness: Effects and Consequences

In the United States, Iranian Americans are legally classified as white. Their educational attainment, income levels, and housing also align, and even surpass, those of the white American population and other immigrant groups. Also, many people in Iran identify as white and carry this identity when they immigrate to the United States.

> "There is no racism in Iran because 'all people are Iranian and assumed to be white.'"[3]

> "Persian is a branch of white. There is no difference between them…. No because maybe white here is common for European white- the word we say in Persian is Anglo-Saxon. Or for example, the European or some parts of Russia. Ukraine for example. As far as I can see in this society, they know that kind of race as a real white. To tell you the truth, we are not assumed white in this society, just on the paperwork. Because of that I prefer, I don't want to say white. We are white Middle Eastern, Middle Eastern white."[4]

These two responses reflect some Iranian American's strong claim to whiteness without question until it is challenged by the white identity in the United States. Iranian American's legal whiteness, as well as some Iranian Americans' self-identification as white, is initially surprising. As evidenced by racial hostility in media representation and on-the-ground experiences, Iranian Americans are not received as white by the dominant culture, which is to say, white America. I begin the presentation of my results by unpacking Iranian Americans' proximity to whiteness because I understand it as the beginning step in constructing Iranian American racial identity. Aryaye identity and Iranian American's legal whiteness predates most of the other constructors of identity I discuss in this section. As frivolous as the narratives forming Iranian American's white identity are, it is worth fully exploring their origins and the full impact of their consequences. I

[3] Aria (M)
[4] Aria (M)

begin with a narrative of Iranian whiteness that originates in Iran and Europe, the myth of Iranian Aryan identity.

Aryan Myth

The Aryan myth is the belief that Iranians descend from the original Aryan race, and that Iran is the land of Aryans. However, this is a conflation between Ariya referenced in historical sources from the region of Ancient Persia and the modern Aryan identity.

> "Ariya in the Iranian sources refers to a group of people sharing a common cultural and linguistic heritage, who defined themselves as ariya against anariya, or non-ariyas. Ariyas included Persians, Medes, Alans, Sakas and other groups broadly related to each other. Etymologically, it is usually accepted that ariya meant "of good birth," denoting ideas of nobility and lordship, particularly fitting for an ethnonym…is believed that the term Iran derives from ariya too.… The confusion between ariya and Aryan is a particularly acute case of anachronism, one that has distorted ancient sources beyond recognition and exploited them to confer credibility to the Aryan myth in Iran and elsewhere. Ariya, as we just saw, was an ethnonym used by a fairly restricted group of ancient people sharing a culture and a language, scattered from North India to the Iranian plateau exclusively; in particular no western or European people were included in this appellation. Modern Aryan, on the other hand, although formally derived from ariya, is a racial category born in the nineteenth century, and whose very conceptualization was made possible with the advances of modern science (especially linguistics and Darwinism)" (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011, 461).

Zia-Ebrahimi unpacks the Aryan myth and Aryaye identity as not only a national self-identification with roots in the Persian empire but largely the product of imperial and orientalist influences. Today, the race sciences that underly the assertion of the Aryan racial ideology have been discredited and cannot be separated from recent histories of ethnic cleansing and Nazi Germany. Despite the arbitrary roots of this identity for both Iranians and Europeans, it is still common for Iranians to identify with this identity today (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011).

The origins of the pseudoscientific evidence in support of Iranians' Aryan identity lies in the work of orientalist scholars and the racial sciences. The term Aryan was first introduced by French Orientalist, Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron in 1773, who resided in India and

studied Persian, Sanskrit, among other Eastern languages (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011, 448). The Aryan myth began to formulate when linguistic similarity began to be interpreted as racial kinship (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011, 450). Henry Field, an American physical anthropologist, classified the "Iranian Plateau race as a distinguishable branch of the white "Aryan" race. In the twentieth century, racial science correlated linguistic similarity to physical anthropology. Ethnological connections were drawn between Europe and Iran through the Indo-European language tree to reaffirm Iranians' Aryan identity. This classification was cemented as an ethnonational identity as part of a nationalistic campaign carried out by the Pahlavi regime (Maghbouleh: 2017, 64).

In mid-20th century Iran, the Aryaye identity was revitalized and was fundamental to the formation of Iran's central ethnonational identity. Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was self-titled ariyàmehr, the "light of the Aryans" (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011, 446). Constructing the Aryaye identity was pivotal in Reza Shah's intertwined projects of legitimizing his power and proximate Iran to western allies. Ideological re-education campaigns were implemented alongside Reza Shah's modernization projects in his white revolution. Iranian historian and academic follower of orientalist scholarship were responsible for forming Iran's standardized history curriculum in Pahlavi's time. Consequentially, the pseudoscientific narrative "proving" Aryaye identity was implanted into a generation of Iranians.

With roots in racial science and imperialist projects, Iranians' Aryaye identity is tenuous, further disillusioned with the reality of their racialized social experience in the United States. Nevertheless, affinity with the Aryaye identity is still commonplace among Iranian Americans. There is a smaller vein of conservative Iranian communities who actively defend Iranians' Aryaye identity. For instance, Jason Jorjani, an Iranian American writer and public alt-right figure. Jorjani's platform champions a fictitious history of Iran as a racially pure, white civilization until

polluted by Islam and ethnic others, calling the fall of the Persian empire the "first and greatest white genocide" (Schaeffer, 2018). Jorjani is an extreme example, but he demonstrates that the Aryan myth is not only a product of orientalist imaginations, it also cannot be ideologically separated from white supremacist thought and history. The following quotes capture some examples of Iranian Americans questioning Aryaye identity. These questions did not arise in Iran, where these beliefs are left unchallenged for the most part. Instead, living in the United States has provoked a deeper examination of one's identity.

> "It's just your heritage and you don't have an option on whatever application you're filling out that you're Persian. You're either like Iranian or something there is an option if you pick white, there is an option for choosing Middle Eastern white. But I definitely don't think I identify as someone who is white or Caucasian. I think that was sort of a cultural shock. And it didn't hit me until I was, I think, in senior year of high school when I started to think about college applications, and started to fill them out, and noticing, oh what is my race, I don't know what my race is. I asked my dad, and he said, "oh yeah, we're white". And I said, "no we're not, we don't have white privilege." Or it was kind of silly to me that just because some guy identified Caucasian to be these certain areas, now Caucasian and white are interchangeable. So, I thought that it was silly that I would be labeled as someone who is white because of where I lived or where I was born."[5]

> "That is so interesting to me because like I don't know, the reason why Middle Eastern folks are considered white is because some Middle Eastern guy came to the U.S. and I don't know what happened here, but he made it so we can be white or something, I don't know, I'm not good at this. I need to do my research. [laughs] Even a lot of Iranians in the U.S. or a lot of Iranians in Iran want to identify themselves as white because they think white is better. The way they want to have Eurocentric features, the way they want to get nose surgery because they see it on TV, because they think that is more beautiful, etc.…. And there are definitely white Middle Easterners, and they benefit, oh trust me they benefit from the white privilege. I had a kid in my high school say, "Oh I saw some Persian guy with blue eyes, oh Persians are so pretty". And I remember in my head thinking, not every Middle Eastern person is going to be fitting your Caucasian standard, you know. And we're still beautiful."[6]

> "I would say that it's a little complex, as it always is, I think that there is, without people being aware of it, there is this general population of Iranians are the descendants of Persians, so we do identify ourselves as Persians. Not that there is anything wrong with that, I think it's good to be proud of one's history, but at the same time, there are times that there are obvious of people truly believing that Aryaye race, Persian race is-I don't think most people are aware of it, but I definitely do see it, especially when it comes to treating other people in the Middle Eastern region. Like the way Iranians think of and treat Afghan immigrants, it becomes very evident that they truly believe that, why am I saying they, it is something that is generally believed in Iran, and it is really upsetting,

[5] Tara (F)
[6] Shirin (F)

> we tend to behave as if the Persian race, and it's not even a race [laughs] is better than others in the exact same region. But at the exact same time there are signs of lack of self-esteem when it comes to our own race, always trying to appeal to another racial identity that most people think of better, which would be white people. Which is why our culture is slowly becoming more westernized and trying to constantly follow what is being taught as better, which is on a global scale, whiteness is taught to be better. None of these are good things."[7]

These quotes reveal some of the internalized beliefs and prejudices that underlie the Aryaye identity. Beauty standards of light skin and light hair were not questioned till a white American compliment them. Relationship to white privilege was not interrogated until a parent claimed whiteness. In the United States, Iranian Americans do not sit as comfortably in their white identity because they are confronted with its origins in white supremacy as they are rejected by white America.

Despite the less than shaky science that founded the imperial modernization projects of Reza Shah, Iranian's identifying as Aryaye prevails (Maghbouleh: 2017, 63). The reality of these projects was to erase the ethnic/tribal diversity within Iran's borders and assert the superiority of this newly constructed ethnonational identity among Iran's neighbors in the Middle East. The assertion of Iranians' whiteness operates through a framework of white supremacy, which is upheld in Iran's racial ideology.

> "there are many Iranians, my friends, that I talk to them about these things, and they are very happy that they are saying they are white. And that was irony because you can say that you're white but there is no point in saying you're white. You don't have white privilege by just saying you're white. Your identity, the whole situation, decides that you have a white privilege or not. Just saying that you're a white person doesn't show that you have a white privilege. Let's say you want to use that privilege; you cannot use that privilege by saying that. I think it comes from this idea that many Iranians are hanging out with other Iranians, so they are not aware of this situation. They just feel like that in United States, they are considered white person, and they are just happy about this."[8]

[7] Leila (F)
[8] Ali (M)

> "when people asked how I identify, I would say I'm Iranian. Then when other Iranian people would say we're white, I remember I would not identify with that. I was aware that people were trying to assimilate themselves to a group that was in a superior position. And I think we still have that."[9]

> "I think this is so deep in us, this white-worshipping, and this white- we've bought so much into it and it started, and it started with our last generation, our parents because they bought into the imperialism. And they bought into it not thinking, they didn't know, it was sold to them, it was packaged and sold to them so brilliantly that they bought into it. It's still going on. You know, it's still going on. So, I think when you talk about that, when you speak against that, you're going against, you're kind of an outcast. I mean I'm an outcast within my family. Thank god we love each other enough that we can argue that stuff and it doesn't outcast me. But it's definitely something they don't- because if they admit to that, their entire life is questionable. They can look into that…. I don't think it's ours alone. Everyone has tried to buy into this big white god, it's just that- we have to stumble on each other."[10]

> "They put people on a pedestal, the whiter they are."[11]

> "They ignore it. The community does not want to acknowledge this, no. We are treated different as in, we do receive a lot more privileges than a lot of other immigrant communities. That does not mean that no Iranian struggle here. Because again, the definition of privilege isn't necessarily that one has the perfect life because they have lighter skin, or because they are white. That is not what privilege is, privilege is that we have better life chances, that we are given more chances, and that is it. We are given more opportunities. We are financially way better off, way better off, much better access to education, we are more likely to finish our college degree, we are more likely to seek, or sorry, not seek, but finish higher education. I change the word to finishing higher education because if I were to say seek, that would mean that other communities don't want to, which is not true. We are definitely are treated different and higher than other immigrant communities."[12]

> "We do definitely play a role in enforcing it, and we do definitely benefit from white supremacy. I have question in that. I think the main root of that perhaps, or perhaps that is not the main root, but as far as my understanding goes and the limited information I have about history. Well obviously, Iran has been colonized heavily, for hundreds of years at this point, and we've had many, many, many European visitors [laughs] visitors is in air quotes. There has been a lot of cultural exchange. Again, because of our proximity to whiteness and us being very passing, I think it was just a very good opportunity from the beginning, to side with the white man. And try to fit in the white man's world. And that has just been passed down. It is not something a lot of people are aware of or like to admit."[13]

It is clear from these responses, that Iranian Americans are aware of the privileges they have in the United States, and that they do not have the same extent of privileges as White

[9] Atoosa (F)
[10] Atoosa (F)
[11] Soraya (F)
[12] Leila (F)
[13] Leila (F)

Americans. This realization that self-identification white whiteness does not equate to white privilege. The insistence of claiming whiteness is not awarded with further privileges, rather honorary whiteness only maintains the status of white supremacy. Still, seizing to a proximity to whiteness is inseparable from the damaging consequences of whiteness. The following subthemes, colorism and ignorance towards racism highlights these consequences.

Colorism

A clear example of how white supremacy operates in Iranian culture is through the high-regard for euro-centric beauty standards. Colorism in the form of light skin privilege and beauty standards is prevalent. Preference for lighter skin and discrimination against darker skin is extensive in every-day language. Iranian culture also upholds featurism in the form of preferring euro-centric features such as the sloped-bridge nose over the Iranian hooked-bridge nose, resulting in a large industry of rhinoplasty in Iranian culture. The significance is greater than beauty standards but directly relates to preferential or discriminatory treatment depending on how closely individuals resemble "white" features.

> "Because in Iran, you're darker skinned or lighter skinned. But for sure, for lighter skin, there was always comments about how they were pretty or gorgeous white skin, there was subtle hints about that."[14]

> "I have this memory that my mom and sister were looking at this girl we know on Facebook, and she's like Azerbaijani Iranian, so she has more white features. Mind you, my grandmother is Azerbaijani Iranian, so I have the nose, I don't know, I feel like I benefit from that privilege a little bit. But this girl is fully Azerbaijani Iranian, she looks extremely white and my sister and my mom, 'oh yea she's so pretty'. What's funny is that I feel like if they saw a brown girl that's Iranian on Facebook doing the exact same thing, they wouldn't be like going after, 'she's so pretty'. I just felt

[14] Atoosa (F)

> it inside of me that they are doing that because she's white. Because looking white as an Iranian, oh 'you're so pretty' or something like that."[15]

> "I can't speak for the whole community. But I can speak for myself, I feel very comfortable around the poc community than I am around American white people, so I would prefer a different box. I would prefer it saying Middle Eastern or Iranian rather than white. But it's a little more complicated for me to say this than maybe someone else to say this, because I'm also lighter skinner, and my light skin brings me privilege, it does. But when you get to know me, and you talk to me, that's when you start to see the cultural layers that you can't see when you see me. You can't see that necessarily; oh, she looks like a white girl. But when you talk to me, it's different. So I struggle with this a lot, I struggle with knowing when I can talk about the whole poc thing without wanting to offend anyone within the poc community."[16]

> "there are a lot of Iranians that are extremely conservative and Republican, and they do want to assimilate. They really want to be identified as white. They like the fact that a lot of Iranians are lighter skinned, and they want to benefit from that. And as an immigrant group, very educated and is prospering in the United States, there is that group to. And I don't want to be associated with them either."[17]

Beauty standards also have origins in ideology, in this case, the ideology of white superiority that has been inherited by the post-colonial population. The beauty standard is not only a preference for lighter skin and European features but also a disdain for browner skin and Middle Eastern features. The beauty standard is a reflection on what are the desirable attainments according to Aryan ideology, further revealing how deeply embedded Aryan ideology is. Furthermore, a seemingly shallow and insignificant notion such as beauty standards are sinister in that they reinforce white supremacy and have an impact on every-day interactions. The second consequence, ignorance towards racism, describes another, explicitly harmful consequences of embracing a proximity to whiteness.

[15] Shirin (F)
[16] Soraya (F)
[17] Soraya (F)

Ignoring racism as whiteness

A unique phenomenon resulting from the maintenance of Iranians' whiteness is ignoring the racial discrimination Iranian's face and perpetuate. There is a cognitive dissonance between Iranians' white identity and Iranians' racialized experience in the United States. The result is largely ignoring the racial discrimination individual Iranian's face and not acknowledging this racialized social experience at the level of the Iranian American community.

> "The first thing we should do as Iranians is to educate ourselves because I think many Iranians are not very aware of this situation and are not aware of racism. That's why even if one person asks about them about your identity or what's happening in Iran, just showing that, yes everything is cool and I don't see any discrimination, I don't see any racism, doesn't solve anything. You try to be very cool about these things, but at the end of the day, that discrimination and racism, has stayed there. I think we have to first educate ourselves, and the other thing, identify ourselves as one group that are- as a separate group other than white American."[18]

> "I think it's a community level until their left on their own, then they have to face it. They don't have to face it when they're in a family, or a group, or a culture thing because they're still feeding into that. Like, 'oh yea, we're Iranians, we're the great immigrants in this country.' So, it's assimilation to white folks. But I think when they come to situations where its challenging individually to them, it opens up that gate a little bit, and it's not easy to go into it so it just depends on the personality you have. [laughs] If you can deal with it, you're going to back to not see it as race. I think Iranians use it when it's to their advantage and ignore it when it's working for them. I've done that."[19]

> I: "Do you think these experiences are recognized as racism by Iranian Americans? "
>
> S: "No because they want to be accepted by white people so bad…"[20]

> "I just thought all Iranians look the same, or they were all the same. This has nothing to do with race, but all Persians are white or something like that. But that was before I came to the U.S. and I've noticed in Iran, people want to be white so bad, like white American. It's so funny actually. They want to be white American so bad. But the white Americans in the U.S. are just like plain racist most of the time."[21]

[18] Ali (M)
[19] Atoosa (F)
[20] Shirin (F)
[21] Shirin (F)

> "I guess I would just want to give a little more explanation on the whole idea of supremacy, and white supremacy, and the effects of it in Iran. That's really something I understand or see until- I did not know the effect of white supremacy in Iran until I moved to the United States, it took a pretty long time and difficult conversations. And I would just say that it is our, now I cannot think- our proximity to whiteness that has created this, I think maybe this illusion, I think that's the word I want to use, but this idea that we are different from the people in the same region. By the word different I mean that we have this subconscious belief that we are better than the people in the same region, and it is really because of our proximity to whiteness. Although we are never going to be looked at as white enough to European white people, but because we look closer to that skin tone, skin color, we allow ourselves to demand to be treated less terrible than people with darker skin. I don't know if this is all making sense, but I know that if I bring this up in front of other Iranians, I would get a lot of push back because it's obvious not something we're comfortable talking about or admitting."[22]

A good deal of these responses simultaneously demonstrating racial awareness while claiming there is a lack of awareness among the community. Though, these responses themselves reflect that it is not a lack of awareness of racism, but a lack of recognition of racism among community members. Differential treatment based on race is acutely felt on an individual level.

These comments link white Americans to perpetuating racism and being white as ignoring racism as the perpetrators. Recognizing racism would crack the foundations of self-identification with whiteness. Underlying this willing ignorance is an understanding that performing the role of whiteness means to silently perpetuate and ignore racism. To recognize racism is to acknowledge that one is not fully accepted as white but is merely performing whiteness. In the next section, I will further explore the consequences associated with identifying with whiteness that originate and are primarily perpetuated in Iran.

Iranian Racial Ideology

Iranians' proximity to whiteness is maintained in Iranian racial ideology. The existence of ethnic and racial minorities in Iran confronts the Aryan myth tied into Iran's national identity. As

[22] Leila (F)

a consequence, ethnic and racial minorities are systematically erased and discriminated against in "mainstream" Iranian society. In this section, I give recognition to Iranian racial ideology because racial ideas are prevalent in Iran and perpetuate harm towards ethnic and racial minorities in Iran. However, the language of race does not exist in Iran as it does in the United States, so issues tied to racial prejudice aren't conceptualized as racial issues, and therefore, largely unrecognized, for their role in shaping racist beliefs that are carried by Iranians.

Ethnocentrism

This section will focus on Iran's "internal others" that have raised racial anxieties and threatened singular national identities throughout Iran's history (Amanat, 2012). Ethnic minorities such as Kurds, Azerbaijanis, Balochis, and Turks threaten the dominant Aryan narrative formulating Iran's singular ethnonational identity. Religious minorities such as the Bahais, Jews, and Christians were cast as the other to consolidate the Aryan and Islamic identities in Iran (Amanat, 2012, 255). Afghani refugees are excluded from Iranian society on systematic and personal levels, despite have a multi-generational presence in the country. In the United States, there is a disproportionate number of ethnic minorities represented among Iranian Americans, largely due to persecution these groups faced in Iran (PAAIA, 2014, 15).

> "There were a few things that I wouldn't perceive them as racism with the culture and education that is dominant in Iran, but now I perceive them as racism. But there were also things I would perceive as racism at the time. For example, the way Afghan refugees are treated in Iran is usually less than kind. The treatment is sometimes systematic as well, not just how average people treat them. I would say even average people treat them better than the government because the average people sometimes have an Afghan neighbor, and they treat them like everyone else. But the government does not treat them like everyone else. Even if they live in Iran for generations."[23]

[23] Aria (M)

"I would say I would not consider racism in Iran, I would consider injustice, is how ethnic minorities are treated in Iran. For example, if you are a Kurd or Turkey speaker, or anything but mainstream Persian. They don't have the same benefits as mainstream Persian. Things that are considered illegal to treat somebody differently, like accent, is federally not okay, is under federal discrimination laws, you can't tell someone they have accent they should not do certain jobs. In Iran, that is quite okay to say to somebody they have an accent, they can't serve at a vocation or something like that. And everyone has to speak with Tehrani accent. If they don't have the average Tehrani accent, they don't appear on TV, and if they do, they are usually in the form of a comic character. When I was doing my masters in Iran, my roommates were from Azerbaijan, and they told me that was the first time I took notice. And it was until I came to the U.S. and I was treated the same way, that I noticed how bad it is. When I was in Iran, I felt it was not just, it was not fair. But I didn't realize how painful it could be."[24]

"my father comes from the Western side of Iran and his mother tongue is not Persian. Although it is close, it is not Persian. My father's family, who still live in Lorestan, they actively try to teach their kids not to speak Lori. If they do, they feel like their kid is going to have an accent when they grow up. And that's the case in Lorestan, and that's the case in a lot of places in Azerbaijan, mainly any other ethnicity in Iran you would see it."[25]

"And the definition is very arbitrary also. For example, let's say people when they refer to themselves and don't call themselves Iranian, they want to subscribe to the history of greater Persia and all that. But that, all that, Iran was Persia, people were speaking a language that was very similar to Kurdish. Has nothing to do with today's Farsi that we speak. But if you are speaking Kurdish, your language is not considered a classy language, it is considered an ethnic language."[26]

"Mainly, most of us, we recognize ourselves as Aryaye. I don't know what is the exact pronunciation in English, or Fars or Persian. But we also have Turks and Kurds and Baluch and so on. But most of them are under the umbrella of being Persian or Fars. Some Kurds believe they are different from being Fars, some Turks believe that they are different."[27]

"The Iranian community in Irvine, in Los Angeles area, is quite big and sometimes I felt that the community was closed to outside. They could go on without depending on anyone outside their own community. And probably for that reason, or probably for other reasons, I would see some harsh words, not being used directly at other races, but used commonly in everyday language when Iranians were speaking among themselves. An example of that is, it was quite natural for at least 30% of Iranians to use a racial slur for Asians that describes how their eyes are small…. I never heard that slur in Iran. I pretty much grew up in Iran, I did my undergrad and masters there. When I left Iran, I was a working adult. I lived in Shiraz, Isfahan, and Tehran. So I was around and I came from a multi-ethnic family, I never heard that. As I told you before, a lot of the Afghan refugees in Iran, a lot of them, probably most of them they are from Hazareh ethnicity, who look Asian. But I never heard that from people in Iran, even people who were not kind to Afghans, they were not describing how their eyes would look like and use that against them to kind of talk down to them or something like that."[28]

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[24] Aria (M)
[25] Aria (M)
[26] Parsa (M)
[27] Dariush (M)
[28] Parsa (M)

> "I think in culture of Iran, unfortunately they don't respect races, but it's true I think. For example, if you want to consider between Iran and Afghanistan. Having the Afghan nationality is not good, even if you are an educated person. You may be most people unfortunately don't respect. Even different culture in Iran, as you told different, but in Iran, there are different "goms" [farsi], I don't know whether it is nationality, I'm not sure. But they don't respect some of them. For example, many people believe that if you are from Lorestan, you are not so clever. They have a proverb that they say, two things from back of the mountain, one is sun, and the other is Lore people."[29]

> "we have a very big community of Afghans living in Iran. Sometimes, yeah, sometimes, not all the time, sometimes they face some racist- and also, some people, sometimes, people are racist about the people who come from the other side of the country. They assume their own race, their own culture, their own customs are more important than others. Not respect other people's interest or customs or these things. Or they want to treat somebody just based on their nationality or where he or she was born, they may have some- but it was not the kind of systematic racism, it's something random, maybe some part of Iran, they are more nationalist."[30]

Some Iranian Americans residing in the U.S. come to the realization that ethnic minorities in Iran were living a racialized experience as they reflect on their own racialized experience. The "mainstream Persian" identity mentioned above is defined as being Aryan. The construction of Aryan as the dominant identity in Iran is built on the marginalization of ethnic others. I have dedicated a separate subtheme to a specific minority group in Iran that unfortunately, exemplify discrimination and alienation that is the consequence of a narrow, exclusionary Iranian identity rooted in whiteness.

Anti-Black Racism

A minority group that greatly demonstrates white supremacy in Iranian culture is the anti-Black racism faced by Afro-Iranians. Most Afro-Iranians descend from enslaved Africans that arrived in the Persian Gulf via the Indian Ocean slave trade that operated between East Africa and the Middle East between 1500 and 1900. However, not all Iranians of African lineage have a

[29] Donya (F)
[30] Parsa (M)

history all enslavement. The emancipation of slavery was officially passed in 1929 in Iran. Afro-Iranians are concentrated in the South of Iran, near the Persian Gulf (Baghoolizadeh, 2012). Afro-Iranians are simultaneously erased from the Iranian population, while also facing intense anti-Black racial prejudice. Their marginalization is in direct maintenance of a narrow Iranian ethnonationalism founded in the Aryan myth. While anti-Black racism in Iran harm Afro-Iranians most directly, it is indicative of Iranian racial ideology functions as part of global racial ideologies of white supremacy and anti-Blackness that are carried through migration.

> "there is definitely some 'otherism' issues that happen there. And you hear a lot of Iranians say, all Iranians have a certain skin tone. So, like there is no Black Iranians. Which is not the case at all. There are Black Iranians in South of Iran and other parts of Iran…. they don't believe that Black Iranians exist. That itself is problematic. Okay. They are extremely racist against Black people."[31]

> "Why do we not talk about Black Iranians that live in Southern Iran? We never- I never knew Black Iranians existed until I saw a post about it in the U.S. a long time ago. Also, Baba Nowruz, be chee megan [what do they call it]? What do they call the person, the Persian New Years, and they dress up as a Black person? If you look into the history of that, that is just extremely racist. There are, Iran's people think slavery didn't happen. I'm not sure, but Black Iranians were servants at some point for like richer, whiter Iranians. Culturally, we are like, 'oh yeah, that's for Persian New Year, that's not racist.' But no, it is racist. And people should look at that and research that. It's the beauty standards. It's the culture. But no one talks about that."[32]

> "How is it that I didn't know that Black Iranians existed until a few years ago? That just speaks on levels because why would no one tell me that? Why would that be hidden? Why would I not know that? Because my grandma, she was a teacher, so she worked in the Southern part of Iran, where majority Black Iranians live in. And one day she goes into school and sees that all her students are Black, and she just was telling me this story, and she was laughing because their skin was darker, and I'm just there like, 'that is extremely racist you know.'"[33]

The erasure of Afro-Iranians is a blatant example of the white-washing of Iran's ethnonational narrative that is founded on the Aryan myth. When examining different aspects of Iran's racial ideology, the Aryan myth is found to underly all of these racial ideas. The Aryan myth

[31] Soraya (F)
[32] Shirin (F)
[33] Shirin (F)

is a unique formula of white supremacy that has been internalized by generations of Iranians fed a false narrative of singular national identity. It is reproduced through seemingly superficial notions such as beauty standards, but it is also present in the non-recognition of racism, the marginalization of ethnic and racial minorities in Iran, and even the erasure of Afro-Iranians of African descent from Iran's national narrative.

Despite this clear erasure, there are many instances in Iranian culture that speak to an anti-Black racial ideology. Examples include colorism in language and beauty standards, as well as racial iconography portraying Black people in derogatory roles, such as slave.

> "I had cousins that were a little darker skin then we were. And you know, I'm sure you heard this, seeah-sookhteh [burnt Black], or there is that terminology, you heard that? Seeah-sookhteh [burnt Black], or seeah-seeah. [Black Black], I don't know, there's songs like that, where race was in it. But it was always, I've talked to her about it too, and because they were a very dignified family, it wasn't a bad thing, it was a cute thing, or she was, ba-namactar bood [cuter], she's cute, it was never in a derogatory way."[34]

> "I would just, give a very obvious example, a very controversial example. Which would be a character, one of the main characters that we celebrate for Persian New Year's, which would be Hajji Firooz [Hajji refers to anyone who has done pilgrimage to Mecca, Firooz is a name]. And I don't know if this would be a very highly controversial character to talk about in the Iranian community because- so the characters wears a red outfit and his face and his hands, I think, are painted Black. So the character is basically doing Blackface. But a lot of people in the Iranian community don't want to accept that this character is literally doing Blackface. There has been many attempts in trying to justify what this character is doing. Oh yeah, this is a very ancient character, who work around fire a lot, and his hands and face would get dirty- he would work with fire around in the mountain, and whenever he would see the first signs of spring, he would come to the city and dance around and inform people spring has arrived, and he wouldn't have the opportunity to wash his face, that's why now that we celebrate this person, whoever dresses up as them, paints their hands and their face Black. Which is [laughs] very ironic because once you start digging deeper, it is completely wrong. No such a character existed back then, even if they did, they wouldn't literally paint their entire face Black, they would just put spots in their face, right. And in addition to that, we can just pay attention to the lyrics of the song he sings. He sings a song while dancing, and the song he's singing it to is similar to Santa Claus. He's the person who brings spring to us. And he is singing the song for him. Amoo Nowruz [Uncle New Years] is obviously white looking, with a white beard and a white outfit, again, very similar to Santa Claus. In the lyrics, he specifically calls Amoo Nowruz 'master'. He literally uses the word master. And again, the behavior, the language used in the song, because in the song he also uses very childish words, mispronouncing words, so obviously the song wants to tell the audience this is an undereducated person who's singing the song. When you put all these things together, it just, very, very much, is similar to what Hollywood use to do to Black people. The Black face, the happy go lucky kind of Black person that they would

[34] Atoosa (F)

> show in Hollywood. There is way too many similarities to deny that we are literally do Black face to celebrate our new year's, one of our main characters. And when we talk about this, the Iranian community pushes back very hard. They deny all of this. Goes through so much trouble to find the contradicting evidence when all the evidence they need is right exactly in front of them. They just need to open their eyes, open their ears, and think for a second. And it's not like this is a main character of the entire new year, he's not, no one cares about him. No one is interested in him. He is not a favorite. All we need to do is stop celebrating him, but there is so much refusal around putting this character aside."[35]

> "in Iran there was a short period where slavery was practiced in Iran. It was probably a very short period, but during the modernization of Iran by Reza shah, that was called illegal. These people who were enslaved, they were let go, and in Southern Iran, in Bushir and in Banderas, you have people who are basically Black. I have heard from them, I have never had a personal friend from that ethnicity, but I have read their comments and their articles saying that some stuff people don't consider racism is actually, it is racist towards them. For example, in the Persian New Year, there is this character that has a Black face and begs in the street. First of all, I never saw that in Shiraz or Isfahan where I grew up or did my undergrad, but I think I saw it a couple of times in Tehran and I saw it a lot on TV. So I think that was a Tehrani thing. According to these Afro-Iranians, this character was based on a slave. And the reason his name is Hajji Firooz, is because Firooz, Talah [gold], these are the names that are used to call slaves because they were valuable items, they were valuable possessions. They were not equal to the owner, but they were still considered very valuable possession. That is why names such as Firooz, which I think means, I don't remember what it means. Almas, which means diamond, and so on, is used for them. And Hajji is because they were imported from Saudi Arabia. When someone went to Haj, to show they are wealthy and so on, they would purchase this companion for themselves and brought them back to Iran, and that is why they are Hajji. Whether or not it is historically true, it is a matter of debate. And to give you an example, last year in Stanford university there was this play by Bahram Beyzaie, had a Black face character for Hajji Firooz. And this Iranian Black guy from Bushir who is a very famous musician who lives in France, he was basically gathering signatures to make Stanford university apologize. These are the things I learned about Iran after I left Iran."[36]

While not all Iranians of African descent have a history of enslavement, the most prevalent representation of Black people in Iran is in images of slavery. This iconography, along with the lack of diverse representations of Afro-Iranians in media and as part of Iran's population, obscures the Afro-Iranian community from Iran's national narrative. Representation in narrow, derogatory roles that do not reflect the reality of an existing community integrated into the Iranian population reproduces an exclusionary Iranian ethnonational identity.

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[35] Leila (F)
[36] Parsa (M)

Anti-Black racism is not unique to Iranian racial ideology, but part of a larger phenomenon of global anti-Blackness. This racial sentiment undoubtedly carries over when Iranians immigrate to the United States, another society that reinforces their anti-Black racism.

> "I think I'm so privileged as an immigrant beyond what a Black person in their country experiences, you know. It's really sad, I feel like we walk on their achievements, and their struggle, without even recognizing it. We think it's America, we think it's America that's giving us this opportunity when it's been on the backs of Blacks and Latinos and Chinese, and other immigrants that this country was made."[37]

> "When we came to the U.S. I think a few weeks after, there was a really young Black boy who was shot by the police, and it was really new to me, that police brutality or that gun violence was even a thing. And I didn't think much about it because I didn't know necessarily that it was because of this boy's race. Or race had to do something with it."[38]

It is outside of Iran, where Iranian Americans are confronted with the realities of Black people in Iran and the United States. While anti-Blackness is prevalent in Iran's racial ideology, there is not the same racial awareness in Iran as in the United States. The language and information for unpacking the racist ideas in the images and narratives that form Iranian racial ideology comes sometimes from racial awareness in the United States. Though it is clear from the examples of Iran's racial ideologies explored above that Iranian American immigrants are by no means blank slates when it comes to race and racism.

Though the language of race is not overtly used in Iran, white supremacy and anti-Blackness operate in Iranian society, predominantly through the Aryan myth. The statements by individuals who did not know about the Afro-Iranian community when living in Iran, or they recounted conversations where other Iranians insisted that Hajji Firooz was not a racist icon are evident of not only the depth of the Aryan myth, but the lengths were gone to protect it. The Aryan

[37] Atoosa (F)
[38] Tara (F)

myth is reinforced in every-day interactions such as these. There is an internalized motivation for protecting these ideas because otherwise, it would lead to unraveling aspects of Iranian racial ideology that are core to Iranian identity-forming. Aryaye identity is built on all of these harmful, racist ideas. Next, I discuss language of self-identification among Iranian Americans as a product of the Aryan myth, Iranian racial ideology, as well as racial perceptions of Iran in the United States.

Weighted Identity- Iranian v. Persian

Many people from Iran identify as Persian rather than Iranian. Although the Persian empire spanned a region greater than Iran's borders, and the culture and language of ancient Persian are far different than that of modern Iran, identifying as Persian persists for multiple reasons. One, identifying with Iran harkens images of terrorism and political turmoil that inspires racial animus towards Iranians. People from Iran choose to identify with Persian to distance themselves from anti-Iranian sentiment and identify with the mystique and glory associated with ancient Persia. Ancient Persian culture is also wrapped up with the Aryaye identity that many people from Iran still identify with instead of the culture and political state of modern Iran. The maintenance of this identity also reinforces anti-Arab sentiment as Persians distance themselves from other ethnicities in the Middle Eastern region to further a claim to whiteness. While Iranian and Persian are often used interchangeably, they each hold significantly different meanings and are used strategically to evoke different meanings.

Distancing from Iran-Directed Animosity

"I have taken my shadow-my Iranian heritage-and inverted it. My shadow is my skin."

Cyrus M. Copeland describes being Iranian as his shadow, in reference to Carl Jung's quote on the shadow as "the part of our personality we reject out of fear, or ignorance, or shame." Copeland negotiates with his shadow, how to acknowledge and present his Iranian American identity, and brace himself for the reaction that no doubt will come from him doing so.
Copeland has chosen to confront reactions to his identity with humor, naming himself "self, appointed goodwill ambassador of a rogue nation" (Whitney, 2020, 12). Others brace for the spooks their shadow creates with intellect, anger, avoidance, or renaming themselves.

Golnaz Komai published her dissertation, "The Persian Veil" which examined when and why Iranian Americans refer to themselves as Persian. The result of 51 interviewees with 1.5 and 2nd generation Iranian Americans revealed that vilification of Iran influenced the self-identification of Iranian Americans. Komai found that the 1.5 generation is more likely to identify as Persian with the rationale of avoiding anti-Iranian sentiments, whereas older generations identify as Persian to harken an image of the pre-Islamic Persian empire. The findings of this research are relevant to understanding the underlying rationales for Iranian Americans identifying either as Iranian or Persian. This study suggests that ethnic identity formation among Iranian Americans is influenced by U.S.-Iran relations as is demonstrated in political rhetoric and the media, where the historical background is often absent. Their experiences illustrate how the word Iranian has taken on a negative connotation because of how Iran is portrayed by the U.S. government, in the media, and the minds of native-born Americans (Komai, 2009).

Interviewees express identifying as Persian as a safeguard from anti-Iranian sentiment. I think we Iranians, almost strategically decide when to use either name. Identifying as Iranian evokes ideas of the Iranian government and racialized political imagery. Rather, identifying as Persian calls to mind a rich and exotic culture and history. There is an awareness of the different connotations these identities hold, and these identities are called upon strategically to shape interactions with Americans.

> "Okay. I say I am Persian. [pause] maybe not Iranian because when you say about the Iranian, or people from Iran, this is not on purpose, it is by accident, one thing goes to their mind. Iran is a very, for example, dangerous country, they want to reach to nuclear bombs, they support terrorist groups. But when I say Persian, they think about the very impressive civilization. Because Iranians have seven thousand years civilization and 2,500-year history of monarchy. That is very impressive. Because of that I prefer to say I am Persian, and as far as I know, Persian people here in this country assumed as white. But I don't say I am white. Just on the paper because as far as I know on paper, we have to answer white when they ask us about our race."[39]

> "Yes, of course, definitely. Unfortunately, because we are from that part of the world, whatever we do, it is connected to politics because when someone hear the word Iran, the first thing that comes to their mind is about politics, it's not about something else. Maybe some people, some Iranians, they think that Americans when they hear about Iran, the first thing that comes to their mind is Persian history or Persian carpet or Persian cat, but that's not true. The first thing that comes to their mind is about politics, so of course, every time Iranians will deal with politics, and there might be many political events or political things around."[40]

> "Yes, actually something else I want to add right now. It is more about history because I think many Iranians are very proud of their history, history of Persian empire. That is why they want to connect themselves with that kind of privilege, they have a historical background. But I think in the west, like in the U.S., race and ethnicity is more about how you identify yourself right now. How are the situation? They define different kind of races because they know that there are some problems here. They want to solve these issues. Let's say that is why they categorize people. But people in Iran just want to connect themselves to that history. There are some problems in our own community, the Iranian American community, to solve these problems they need to be unified, and that is better to call themselves as a separate identity, race or ethnicity."[41]

> "I feel like when I hear Iranians say Persian, I get kind of annoyed a little bit, even though I do it too. Because I think that sometimes they want to sound exotic because no one knows what the heck Persia is. But when they hear Iran, they're like, 'oh, what you're like Arab? You're Iraqi? You're part of the Bin Laden family?' So, you know it's like people want to disassociate that. And if that's

[39] Aria (M)
[40] Ali (M)
[41] Ali (M)

> their reason, then I think it's problematic. But I think also just, historically speaking, sometimes I like to use Persian because I like to disassociate my understanding of Iran from the Islamic republic. And I'm like, I'm such a- I love Persepolis, I love learning about Zoroastrianism and the Persian empire, and the fact that the empire, there's so many similarities between us and some Northern Indian and Armenians and Azerbaijanis, and we all celebrate Nowruz and Afghanis, and Afghanis speak Dari, and I can understand Dari, so it's like, when you say Persian, you feel like you're recognizing a bigger ethnic group then just yourself and it has historical significance, so there is a beauty in that. But as long as you're not, again, using the terminology just to satisfy and lessen the fears white Americans have. Because if you do that then that linkage between Iranians and terrorism is very going to go away. Right, we have to desensitize the group that's viewing that part of the world, however their viewing it, so we can't use Persian just to glorify, we can't. But if you do use this to create more unity around ethnic groups, I think that that's fine. I think it depends on the person."[42]

> "I definitely think they evoke different meanings because a lot of people don't know who Persians are. So, like I've been asked, 'Oh so you're from Persia'. I have to explain that no, Persians. They are kind of used interchangeably, but if I were to say Iranian it would probably evoke different feelings, it would spark up different thoughts than if I were to say Persian. So, I think it's just because of the government issues and everything that has been going on for the past couple years after the Iranian revolution. A lot of people that I've me didn't know that Persian meant Iranian, so I probably, reading the room, would prefer to use Persian over Iranian. But I would use them interchangeably. A lot of times I'm Iranian-Persian, I'd say both."[43]

> "Because when it comes to race, this is my understanding, it's not necessarily tied to a country that you're from. And I feel like Persia because it's older and encompasses a larger region and encompasses a set of cultures, then that can be a race. Because I think there are people that are similar to our race, but aren't necessarily in Iran, but I connect with them so I'm Persian."[44]

> "I think it comes from the idea that how the white race is defined. It comes from Caucasia; they call it Caucasian right. Because it comes from that part of world, the Persian empire, they always connect themselves with that part of the world. They say we are from that part of the world, then they migrated to Iran, and that is why we are also a part of them."[45]

These statements affirm that there are a variety of reasons that Iranians. Some individuals tried to avoid anti-Iranian sentiments in every-day interactions. Others felt a kinship with Persian because of this history, culture, and even racial identity it evokes. More importantly, there is an awareness present in all of these decisions that Iranian and Persian evoke different responses from other Americans. Though, Persian is not claimed only in efforts to distance oneself from anti-

[42] Soraya (F)
[43] Tara (F)
[44] Mina (F)
[45] Ali (M)

Iranian sentiments. Ties to the Persian empire are also claimed to distant from other ethnicities and races in the Middle East. Some of the intentions behind the Persian identity are interwoven with the racial hostility embedded in the Aryan myth- that the Persian Empire a "pure" Aryan civilization. Claiming Persian is not only distancing from racial animus targeting Iran, but it is approximating oneself to whiteness unpolluted by racialized political events. As I've mentioned earlier in this paper, associated with this approximation to whiteness is distancing from domestic minority groups and foreign neighbors.

Anti-Arab sentiment

The Persian identity is also intentionally called to distinguish Iranians from neighbors in the Middle East, namely Arabs. The desire to draw an identity distinct from Arab Middle Easterners is founded in Iranian racial ideology that proximate Iranians to whiteness, and therefore different and superior to Arabs. The history of the Aryan myth described in the first part of this section has always defined Iranians by the populations excluded from that identity (Amanat, 2012, 11). Zia-Ebrahimi refers to the assertion of Aryaye identity as a "dislocating" of Iran to legitimize racial affiliation with Europe and distance itself from Arab, Turkish, and Semite neighbors (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011, 464).

> "I think there is a bit of slight distinctions where Persians see themselves as different, or at least some Persians see themselves different than Arab based Middle Easterners. So, there is almost a distinction there in racial terms, or maybe more cultural or societal. I think language, history, culture, diet, is it a distinct diet and they seem themselves as distinct from other, Arab-based Middle Eastern cultures."[46]

> "have one specific interaction who was working at Walmart a few years ago. He was Iranian, and my dad is also Iranian, so they started talking and they're like, 'oh my coworker is a dirty Iraqi.' And I'm just like, in my own head, what the hell, dude we're in the U.S., you're not better just because of some war that happened between Arabs and Persians 4,000- like that's a long time ago!

[46] Farbod (M)

> [laughs] Their still so, you see it in Persians, they hold a grudge against Arabs all the freaking time, all the time."[47]

> "I do think the reason that some people refer to Persian as if it's a race, I think that's the reason. And just looking at our own history, by a far stretch we might be able to call Aryaye a race, but I'm not even sure that would apply to it because when we talk about Persian, well who are we referring to as Persian? People who live in Iran who are descendants who are people who used to live during the Persian empire. And what was the racial demographic of the Persian empire. Well, we took over a bunch of countries, we lost a lot of land, we gained a lot of land. And it went and back and forth, so there are a mix of different people that fell under that Persian empire, so that is why Persian is not a race."[48]

The anti-Arab sentiments are a function of Iran's Aryan myth. Claims to the Persian identity are consciously or unconsciously used to proximate oneself to whiteness. Though the racially pure Persian Empire is a false construction of the Aryan myth. Claiming Persian heritage to connect with a rich history and culture shared by diverse communities inside and outside of Iran better reflects the historical Persian empire. Persian heritage connects many cultures across the Middle East.

The broad takeaways from the themes explored above are that Iranian American immigrants do not arrive in the United States as blank slates. Iran's racial ideology was formed out of a limiting historical narrative that was weaponized to create an exclusionary ethnonational, or "mainstream Persian" identity. The underlying racial ideals underlying Iran's racial ideology were inherited by western Imperial powers and are part of a globalized racial ideology spread by colonialism, imperialism, and even mass migration and transnationalism (Zamora, 2016). Racial identity in Iran is characterized as narrow, singular, and exclusionary. Iranians' race in the United States is also defined by exclusion, though I will describe factors erasing and reformulating identity in the United States as a broadening of Iranian American racial identity.

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[47] Shirin (F)
[48] Leila (F)

Racialized political events

Before the wave of immigration following the Immigration and Nationality Act 1965, there was a relatively small population of Middle Easterners settled in the United States, and in general, came from backgrounds of high education and privilege, that allowed them the opportunity to immigrate. Before the 1979 revolution, most of the Iranians in the United States were international students studying in American universities. For most of the twentieth century, this population was insulated from discrimination by their privileges, and public sentiment largely viewed Middle Easterners as mystic foreigners with exotic and ancient cultures. Events such as the Iran Hostage Crisis, the 1979 revolution, 9/11, and other events of political turmoil in the Middle East shaped Americans' anti-Iranian sentiment. The image of Iranians and Middle Easterners, in general, shifted from exoticism and mystique to the backward outsider and foreign threat. This phenomenon has been described as a racialized political shock (Zarrugh, 2016), and has played a large role in racializing a population that once held a fixed "honorary white" position in the U.S. racial hierarchy (Bonilla-Silva, 2004).

> "After the Soviet Union collapsed, Iran became the first enemy of the United States for no reason [laughs] for no reason. I cannot tell you for example, one event or one reason, but maybe, some people need this kind of bad relation between Iran and the United States. But there is no just one reason for that. I just told you some of them, for example, specifically. The American government believes the Iranian government supports terrorist groups, and wants to reach the nuclear bomb, and maybe killed Americans in Iraq and Afghanistan, and supports some terrorist groups like Al Qaeda and Isis. That kind of thing created that kind of background for American."[49]

> "In the early 1980s, very late 1970s, and it was dramatic for people of Iranian background to have very active, strong bias against, in all aspects of the community. And that was more because of the geopolitical issues going on at the time… I wasn't here before that time, but my sense was that there was not that much strong bias against Iranians at all. As a matter of fact, there was maybe a little bit of mystique and interest and I'm not sure I would say appreciation, but a little bit of mystique and interest before then. Kind of a cool, foreign thing. But then after the revolution in Iran, where there was a media animosity between the two countries and the hostage situation. It was very active, very prevalent, very strong anti-Iranian sentiment. I think that was its height. And I think

[49] Aria (M)

> then it's kind of simmered up and down. And then I think more recently, since there has been, again kind of a geopolitical turn towards radical Islam related terrorism, then I think Iranians just get lumped in. Lumped in with other Middle Easterners, with Sikhs with headdresses, with head coverings, anyone who someone may, even mistakenly fall into that category."[50]

> "Can I give you an example? I mean this is pop culture, okay, the best example in my opinion is Omar Sharif. Are you familiar with Omar Sharif? Okay, so Omar Sharif who was this actor, Egyptian actor, he was famous in the very late sixties and seventies, maybe in the early eighties. Great actor played in some really big movies. He was idolized. There was this kind of mystique and attraction to Middle Easterners as this kind of exotic, interesting people. Because that inherent racial animosity wasn't really cultivated. It might have been some subtle, you're not Anglo of course. United States has always had it's issues with, even Southern European versus Northern European, Italians and Greeks and so forth. Where there have been these lines that always had some degrees of white enough. But it really wasn't, as far as I understand because I wasn't here then, but it wasn't really as pronounced. Or not even close as pronounced. And it wasn't until geopolitical issues turned these perceptions and these animosities were created, whether it was first through Iran and later through more, broad-based radical Islam movements and activities, that its really heightened. I think its very, very much, the degree is completely based on that aspect of it."[51]

> "Yeah, I think the hostage-taking for me, was the beginning of it. It was very distinct. Two days before the hostages were taken, I was hearing, "oh you're from eye-ran? Where is that? Oh, Persia? The Persian carpet and the Persian cat. And you guys have oil, and dah dah dah". And the minute the hostage thing happens [snaps], you're backward, you're terrorist, you're uncivilized, you guys are- yea, so it was very different. That was the moment for me."[52]

> "After 9/11 happened I was told that you need to hide your Iranian-ness, you need to not do anything that would make you Muslim sounding. What the heck does that even mean? Well, someone said, well you're lighter skinned, so people don't know you're Iranian, so don't share that with them, don't share that with them because if you do, they're going to treat you differently. And I, for a couple years, was mortified, I felt terrible. Because I had students in the high school, middle school I was at, well if these women could just wear bikinis like our women, they wouldn't- using bombs and blowing things up, there were really terrible things people were saying after 9/11 about the Muslim community, and really about any Middle Eastern community, it doesn't really matter, if you're Iranian, or Palestinian, or what you are, you were facing some kind of discrimination after 9/11."[53]

Iranian Americans observe shifts in how their American community receives them after monumental political events such as the Iran Hostage Crisis and 9/11. They identify these events as moments that impacted political rhetoric, media representation, and public sentiments directed

[50] Farbod (M)
[51] Farbod (M)
[52] Soraya (F)
[53] Soraya (F)

at Iranians and Middle Easterners in general. Some individuals recall other racialized immigrant communities being targeted as Iranians in the racial animus directed at Iranians during the Iran Hostage Crisis and Islamic revolution. There has been a similar experience around the War on Terror where Iranians are targeted by anti-Muslim or anti-Arab discrimination, whether they are Muslim or ethnic Arabs or not. Racialized political shocks in the Middle East lumped Iranians with other Middle Eastern and Muslim communities under an umbrella of shared racialized social experience (Maghbouleh, 2020, 615). These communities are stripped of their diverse cultures and heritages by the broad, distorting brush strokes of racialization. Similar to the Aryan myth, the racial lumping of Iranian Americans limits their identity, but through broadening rather than narrowing of their singular identity.

Media Coverage

Law professor, Khaled Beydoun, defines Islamophobia in three parts: private, structural, and dialectical (Beydoun, 2018). Scholar, Eric Love, maintains that islamophobia racializes Middle Eastern communities by spurring racial animus towards cultures associated with Islam in the westerner's imagination (Love, 2017). Racialized anti-Muslim policies systematically discriminate against Middle Easterners, the over-saturation of media coverage of racialized political shock in the Middle East justifies these policies to the public, who in turn, act on racialized, anti-Muslim sentiments on the level of everyday discrimination against Middle Easterners. Interviewees identify media coverage of Iran as a significant platform shaping Americans' perceptions of Iran and Iranians.

> "Yeah, like you're being repetitively conditioned with the same kind of information. If you're only telling people the negative stories, they're only going to know and remember the negative stories. So, it's not like people are going to go out of their way to learn about this country that is so often

talked about. That is really problematic because you're creating these negative connotations in people's heads, and it's not good."[54]

"the main thing was they want to know more about the political system in Iran. I think the reason was they thought the media inside the United States is talking all the time about Iran, but they just talk about Iran as one party/target, the whole system of Iran. But they don't say about the details of Iran, and the political figures, and the political people, who is this guy, who is the main person in Iran, this kind of thing. And they were asking me details of those things, like who runs Iran, how is the election in Iran, and these kinds of things."[55]

"We are not, by people around us, we are not being treated differently. But because of media and news and politics are so polluted, people usually come and ask that, 'hey this crazy thing is going on near your country, what do you think about it?' [laughs] Or, there was a guy asking me, 'Do you think the price of the oil will go high or low?' How the hell do I know, I'm a computer science student. He was like, 'No your country has lots of oil.' Okay, that does not make me expert in the economy of oil. That is the only difference, but no, it's fine."[56]

"The only times majority Black countries are brought up in news is if something super catastrophic happening, and by that time, it's way too late to act. But in a country like Iran, things are discussed on a very regular basis. And I know oil has a lot to do with that, but I think it's beyond oil."[57]

"people like Mike Pompeo, Mike Pence, Trump, constantly talking about it, tweeting about it, the news constantly reporting on this. It does definitely help them justify their actions when they do intervene…. And they allow themselves to justify this by saying oh, the Iranian government is just really terrible, they have all these nuclear activities, and we don't like it, and they treat their people terribly, so we're just going to screw over the people, because that doesn't really matter, and we're going to do whatever we want in terms of foreign policy"[58]

"I think that because of the turmoil and the groups that have been sponsored by the government of Iran and the terrorists the government does on its own people, that is what the media portrays. That's what the media portrays to people that are taught from a young age to not be deep thinkers, they're not deep thinkers, they're not critical thinkers for the most part. They just feed off these images and things that come to them because it's easy to get information in that kind of way."[59]

"The question a lot of people have, not just white Americans, people from other countries because there's a lot of racism and prejudice against Iranians, not just in the United States, but in other parts of the world, is like if Iranians are so peaceful, why did they let this happen. Why is it always, why do bombing and terrible things happen only in the Middle East and nowhere else, which is not even true, lots of places, but again it's their limited understanding of the world and that's it, they're not taught the Mossadegh coup d' tat. They're not taught the wonderful achievements the Iranian people

[54] Tara (F)
[55] Ali (M)
[56] Kian (M)
[57] Leila (F)
[58] Leila (F)
[59] Soraya (F)

> have been able to do before this regime. They're really just seeing Iran for what it has been since '79. The ties of the terrorist groups that have formed in the Middle East, I feel like Iran has been scapegoated, and other countries that have also been involved in that, because of their being a puppet to the United States, they're not scapegoated the way Iran is. And people who read the news and people who see these images, that is what their worldview of Iran is. Until they meet Iranians, until they get a chance to visit Iran and see the people, that some of these things, they start to question whether or not the people are like their government, they start to question some of these stereotypes that people have against Iranians. But until that happens, I think most Americans are very fearful of Iran, and they associate any act Iran does, and they find that people are responsible for some of those things, because they're not doing anything to stop it."[60]

Iranian Americans' media representation of Iran from American/western outlets as the main source of informing the American public about Iran. The representation in media does not only give a distorted image of the historical and political context of Middle Eastern foreign affairs, but this distortion also influences public sentiments towards Iranians as individuals and a community. The government of Iran and Iranians are conflated in the public imagination. Media representation functions as a proxy for racialization by the perspective and quantity of racialized political events it broadcasts.

Spokesperson for the Iranian government

Individual Iranians are confronted with American perceptions as shaped dialectical and structural racialized islamophobia. In the American imagination, the Iranian people and the government of Iran have molded into a singular foreign threat. The consequence of which is individual Iranian American's facing interrogation as spokespeople for the Iranian government. Asking a member of a racial minority to speak for their entire community is a common occurrence among many marginalized communities, however, Iranian Americans are often specifically asked to answer for a foreign government. This presents a unique brand of racial discrimination where Middle Easterners are racialized by political events surrounding the War on Terror.

[60] Soraya (F)

"Specifically, for the last two years I have been here, many bad things happened. For example, that aircraft falling that American drone in Persian Gulf, killing the Iranian general, Soleimani. When these things happened in the society some people just ask us, 'what is going on in your country? What is going on in the relationship between United States and Iran?' And they want really to know. When these things happened, I try to explain more, I try to clarify more. And that is my experience."[61]

"People think I'm Muslim just because I'm Middle Eastern. I think that's kind of racist to assume every Middle Eastern folk is Muslim. I've gotten treated differently, and I know if I was white American that would be definitely different. I told you the story, the kid [asked if I like the Iranian or American military better]. And I didn't know bat shit about military, I said American military so he could leave me the fuck alone. That's such a weird question to ask someone. When I tell kids I'm Iranian, they're like, 'Oh yeah, my parents served in Iraq. They've been in Iran a little bit.' Like what does that have to do with me? Okay, like your parents are war criminals, your grandparents are war criminals, what do you want me to say me about that?"[62]

"Iranian American community has a very essential role here. They can help people to distinguish, to explain, American people, we are different than our government. Explain about the history, the tradition, specifically about the revolution that happened 41 years ago in Iran, about the hostage crisis. That thing, I am doing every day, if people ask me about that. When we clarify that is not our fault. We cannot change the policy in Iran, and the election is not effective or good enough, or changing. The foreign policy in Iran. We try, but we couldn't. I think these things are very helpful to the people, to us, to prevent from the racism here."[63]

"I think its often confrontation. A lot of times, thinking back to the few times I've been asked, it's been a lot of men who start that conversation. They're like, 'oh you're from Iran so you know about blah blah blah', and no, it feels like attempting to mansplain at that point. So, there is that intersection between race and gender. They're like, "well oh let me teach you about blah blah". Like okay, that's not what this is about."[64]

"So, I think being put on the spot in that way to have to defend the country, I guess it is kind of hypocritical too because I've been so distanced from the culture and the country that I don't know everything that is going on in Iran anymore in the same detail I used to, and I guess I can't expect other people who are not Iranian, who know as much detail as I would hope they would know. I do feel that way sometimes, but not as frequently just because I'm not talking about being Iranian as frequently when I move in the U.S. When I was in high school, I would tell people, I'm not from here, I'm new to this school, I'm from Iran. Or they would ask where I'm from, and I would say from Iran. But ever since starting at '—' University, it's easier to just say I'm from '—', Washington. It just cuts the story short and I don't have to tell people I'm Iranian. But if does come up, then yeah."[65]

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[61] Aria (M)
[62] Farbod (M)
[63] Aria (M)
[64] Mina (F)
[65] Tara (F)

> "I think we, as an Iranian, sometimes we need to work more to prove ourselves in the workplace. If somebody else- we are very, in the workplace, I as an Iranian, khelee to cheshmee mah [we are often in the public eye]. So we need to work more to prove ourself, I want to be a hard worker, but overall, some people, I heard about some Iranian community, we have a very group in Facebook, that all the people are sharing their idea about finding the jobs, and some of them, shared that when I mentioned my history in my resume, okay I'm from Iran, it may have kind of a negative impact on the employer or sometimes, if some of them share if you change your name to an American name, you will have much more offers, compared to a Middle Eastern name, Persian name. Right, because in my company I am working right now, I'm the only person I'm Iranian. So, I'm very careful what I'm doing, I need to do the right thing, to have a negative impact. Because I'm the only person, so if I do something wrong, okay they assume that all Iranians are like this. I am sure that they won't think like that, but the thing that I can do, I try to work more or try to be a hard worker try to be honest, try to be the best that I can, to have a good impact of my race and my nationality here. To have a good reputation I mean."[66]

> "There are times that white people have asked me that question, sometimes it's a normal conversation, but for the most time it becomes very, very awkward. There have been situations where, most of the time, it became awkward, but the person was just genuinely trying to be nice and make a conversation, they just didn't know how, and it went very wrong with responses like, 'oh my god, I have a friend, blah blah blah who is also Iranian, or a coworker, or someone living on the first floor living on our apartment' and I'm like, 'okay cool.' [laughs] Or in my first two years, I used to work as a cashier and I had a couple of really negative experiences that some made me feel self-conscious, and some made me feel- those negative experiences that I had, it was more in the form of the interrogation than a conversation. It would be like, 'oh where are you from', I would say I'm from Iran, and then the person would just cross their arms and stand there silently as I would be checking out their items for them. Or the person would say, 'I'm sorry you're from eye-ran or something like that.' And I corrected him, and I said, 'It's Iran, and have a nice day', and I kicked him out of my register."[67]

> "sometimes their intention is to just check in and see if I'm okay. In those check ins, it's also like, 'how are Iranians feeling', like how the heck am I going to answer that question. How am I going to know how, some Iranians are very happy with what's happening, some Iranians are very unhappy with what's happening, I can't speak for the entire Iranian people. But I do think that, especially with last year, and the whole going to war with Iran, and pulling out of the JCPOA, and different things are happening, a lot of people were just checking in, they really were checking in. But there's always that annoying question that gets asked, and I think we can all relate to that. Other groups can relate to, with the Black Lives Matter movement, where people were like they want one Black person to talk for the entire Black community, that just needs to stop, you can't ask one person, you can't think the entire group thinks the same, that's just not possible."[68]

Forcing the role of foreign affairs expert on individual Iranian Americans is a form of racism. This is a similar experience for other racialized communities, where individual members are asked to speak for the entire community, obscuring diverse perspectives and backgrounds with

[66] Kian (M)
[67] Leila (F)
[68] Soraya (F)

a broad stroke of racialization. The impact of the broadening force of racialization is it makes individual members of a community answer for events or beliefs they have varying degrees of knowledge or attachment to.

Racial Discrimination

Moroccan American novelist and professor, Laila Lalami describes Americans of Middle Eastern descent to live with the status of "conditional citizenship". Conditional citizenship distinguishes that while citizenship is a significant precondition for belonging in U.S. society, it does not ensure it. Lalami describes her conditional citizenship as her "relationship to the state, observed through exposure to its policies or encounters with its representatives, is affected in all sorts of ways by my being an immigrant, a woman, an Arab, and a Muslim" (Lalami, 2020, 6). Some of the consequences of conditional citizenship include being the target of biased legislation, disparate treatment by law enforcement, misrepresentation and erasure in media, employment-based discrimination, and is the site at which personal prejudices influenced by all the former consequences are unpacked and dished out. It means being forced into the role of spokesperson and scapegoat depending on which serves the dominant society in the given moment. Conditional citizenship suitably describes living a racialized social experience in the United States.

Iranian Americans can also be described as conditional citizens. They occupy a position that is both targeted and vulnerable because they do not mean the conditions of full belonging, safety, comfort, and protection. are subject to a variety of examples of racial discrimination. Some forms of racial discrimination are generalized towards people of color, or individuals perceived to be of Muslim background or Middle Eastern origin. Other times, the discrimination directly targets them as Iranians inspired by anti-Iranian racial animus.

"My cousin was speaking Farsi with his friend walking around Green Lake and a white elderly woman said, don't speak another language and try to get dogs to attack my cousin. And this was pretty recently. Just because their Iranian. We had a lot of family friends who were called spies and laid off from certain companies like Boeing- because of the fact that their Iranian."[69]

"I feel like not just because the fact that I'm Iranian, but as a woman, I face sexism and racism, like that's just part of my life that I also have to experience because I do wear the fact that I'm Iranian proudly. And I do think that there are many times at work and other situations, where I'll get comments like, 'Oh you're not American enough.' Like I get treated very differently than a white male gets treated. Doesn't matter how hard I work, I don't get recognized, I don't get acknowledged, I get talked down to, I'm disrespected, and these are things that I see happen in the American society that very much show how much they view equality among the sexes, and how progressive they are. In practice that's not the case. And add the fact that you're Iranian on top of that and you start to see a huge difference in how people perceive you and interact with you."[70]

"Obviously the Iranian revolution is going to be the #1 that I'm going to think of, and I know that at the time, the Islamic revolution had a good amount of support, but we've all seen foreign government's ability to intervene in national political systems, and we already have proof that the Islamic revolution was in fact, the intervention of U.S., UK, and France. The fact that people think that it was the Iranian people's decision to support the Islamic revolution in Iran, the fact that people still believe that I think is a form of racism. Just the disrespect to the intelligence of an entire nation. If that was a belief back then, and people to the truth now, that would have been a different situation, but a lot of people still believe in that. And many, many Americans don't that their government, was in fact, behind our revolution."[71]

"We had seen more anti-immigrant policy imposed in recent years. Especially a travel ban that is posed against six nations, including Iran…. It has affected me and many other people, their families are separated, they fall apart. I know people that get married, they apply for their husband or wife, they cannot bring them here, you know. Or even, I'm single but I have my friend here, living with their wife. In the past, when they were expecting baby, they could ask to the mother of the wife can come and take care of the family, but it was not possible anymore. Everybody cannot invite their family, even for visiting. People here are feeling more isolated, feeling more- I see I have Pakistani coworker, his family can easily get visa. For us, we have more restriction, we have more policies that impose it against us. We have more challenges. Although we are not, it's not our fault, we need to pay the price, but Iranian government, these two governments have conflict, but we as an immigrant have to pay the price."[72]

"In high school I definitely experienced racism because it was during the hostage crisis and I was the only Iranian in school. And so, I would have white boys, seniors, I think I was freshman, sophomore maybe. And you know, the jocks of the school would block me in the hallway and sing the national anthem to intimidate me."[73]

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[69] Soraya (F)
[70] Soraya (F)
[71] Kian (M)
[72] Kian (M)
[73] Atoosa (F)

"Where it does happen, interestingly enough, is whenever you travel. You have to make sure, at least my own sense, and I've had this experience, you have to make sure everything is completely in order. You have to have, you know, I have to make sure my face is shaved, that I'm not dressing too much like a slob, things like that. Because when I am, I tend to be pulled out more separate, questioned more. There was a case when I was coming back from a trip from Europe, and it was in the 1990s, it was right around one of the Olympics, and I was coming back from Europe, and I was in medical school, and I was stopped in the airport four times by plain-clothes security because they thought I had- I was young, I had a thirty hour trip, I was completely unshaven, I looked terrible, so I was stopped four separate times by plain-clothes security to find out what I was doing, what were my intentions, where I was going, all of this extra questioning and security. So, it's things like that come up that I think are specific to again, how I look as a Middle Easterner."[74]

"I knew people who got detained at the border after the plane was bombed last year. They told me there were people who were detained that weren't even Iranian. They looked Iranian, so they took them with the group. Or there were people weren't even born in Iran but because they were with their parents, they were also detained. Nowhere on their passport is it that this person is Iranian but because they have an Iranian name, they also detained them. So, I think it just comes to show the measures their taking that sometimes, honestly, it felt really bad to be an American, having been born in the U.S. and not even having set foot in Iran, to still be treated the same way. Sometimes hearing those stories, okay I'm an immigrant, I'm facing these challenges, it makes sense. But for this person to be a U.S. citizen and have been born here and to have always called this place home, it must have been hard for them."[75]

"We were just like laughing about something, and I was talk to my sister in Farsi, and we were walking past this restaurant and there was this guy standing outside, talking on the phone. And he like went out of his way, on his conversation on the phone, to snap at me and my sister, and tell us to speak in English. That was the first time. Even though I knew about all the discrimination towards people of color or immigrants or people who were from the Middle East."[76]

"I have family in Canada, and they were traveling to the U.S. and they like travel all the time, but again it was after one of the disputes with the Iranian government, and they were treated really badly at the border. Like the people I know who got detained at the British Columbia border with Washington, they were treated really nicely, like it wasn't as bad as it could have been. But my uncle was traveling from Ontario, so I think the officers there were a lot more strict, and a lot harsher. So, they just didn't have a good experience. So even though they have Canadian passports, they don't like traveling to the U.S. anymore, especially since Trump got elected. I think religion plays a big part of it. If you're Muslim, and if you wear a scarf, then you're more likely to be treated differently or discriminated against."[77]

"The experience for Iranians maybe does not come from society, but it comes from politics, unfortunately. The first time I experienced this personally, was back in 2017, January, that I was applying for UNC Charlotte, to get the admission and come. Because there was a travel ban for some number of countries, including Iran, the admissions office said, no if we give you admission

[74] Farbod (M)
[75] Tara (F)
[76] Tara (F)
[77] Tara (F)

you won't be able to get visa and come, so we are not wasting that position on you, we are giving it to someone else. Today that I am applying for some jobs, they are explicitly excluding my nationality from applying for that position. And sometimes I am very excited for that position, I think that I am a very good fit for that position, and just because where I have been born, I cannot apply for that."[78]

"Islamophobia prejudice for sure. I remember in Iran- oh I guess, this is my experience with racism, or just prejudice. When I was in elementary and middle school, people would like make terrorist jokes about me and my family, and like the Jihads and stuff. So that to me was more like Islamic, but now I'm like those two things work together, the race and Islamophobia."[79]

"There is of course profiling, and when you go to the airports and things like that, but I don't know if that is systematic. If the security guards have something like, okay if this person has a beard, or if this person saying something in Arabic, then you need to investigate them more."[80]

"during this time of the world, because there is something that is happening with Muslims and this stuff, the islamophobia is also added to that and it became a more serious thing. And because it is about security, because many people think that people from those Islamic countries are dangerous, it came to the point that, they want to be more aware, and even if they don't consider as racism. I'll give you this example. When I came to the United States, the first thing they do in the airport, is the check all our luggage, and all our stuff. It totally makes sense, they have to check it because of the safety. But I think for Iranians, for some other countries, they check it more detail and sometimes, they talk to you in a bad way. I think it is good to point where they are sure they check everything. But after sometimes they don't behave you well because they feel like they have this opportunity to talk in a bad way, bad behavior to you. They use that islamophobia, or that security thing, to use it as a tool to talk about your race…if this thing happened to another race, or an African American person, that person can easily say this is a direct racism. They are doing because of my race. But even if that happens to us, we cannot say that. If we say that, they say, no, this is because of security and it somehow makes sense because of course, they have to be sure that this is a secure place, and they are checking everything. But I think many times they over-check us or these things happen because we are from that part of the world."[81]

"when this first guy first said I am going to ban all Muslims from coming to the United States, some of my friends were like, "well this is a good thing because we are not Muslims and these Muslims coming here from Pakistan, etc. etc. They are not blending in." This was really funny, and I always knew this was going to end up hurting Iranians the most. If you go back and study history, and this is probably something you know better than me and is your major, your identity is not something you define, its something other people also define. This lady, a German Jew, and she did not identify as Jewish, she was a writer or philosopher, and she was critical of all the religions including Judaism. And before WW2, she escaped Germany, and I think she ended up in the U.S. and became a university professor. And she has a really famous saying that is really interesting to me, she say "if you are attacked as a Jew you have to defend yourself as a Jew". I don't identify with, I don't know the theory of Islam based on that, I am not a Muslim. But if I am attacked as Muslim, I have to defend myself as one. I don't have any other way. When they create Muslim ban, mainly to stop

[78] Dariush (M)
[79] Mina (F)
[80] Mina (F)
[81] Ali (M)

> Iranian from coming to the U.S. that doesn't mean anything if I don't call myself a Muslim. My nationality has been put under that ban and it has affected me."[82]

This interviewee is referring to a quote by Hannah Arendt, "If one is attacked as a Jew, one must defend oneself as a Jew. Not as a German, not as a world-citizen, not as an upholder of the Rights of Man" (Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism). This sentiment expresses how Iranian Americans, as well as those perceived as Muslim or Middle Eastern in general, are the victims of racial discrimination rooted in racialized Islamophobia. Iranian Americans face racial discrimination on two fronts, by being lumped together with other Middle Eastern and Muslim communities facing a shared racialized experience, as well as being the targets of direct anti-Iranian prejudices. In both cases, Iranian Americans are forced to for foreign governments and actors that are outside of their control. They are made spokesperson because in the American imagination individual Iranian Americans embody the political terror and racial anxieties, they have digested from media representations and political rhetoric. Racialized political events play a fundamental role in the racialization of Middle Eastern Americans and Iranian Americans specifically and constructing their racial identity in the United States.

Identity in the U.S.

The social experience of Iranians residing in the United States is characterized by their constructed racial identity. This discrimination and exclusion do not align with the experience of white Americans residing in the United States. Interviewees perceived the gap between these two experiences and acknowledged that identifying as white does not mean the same thing in the United States as they have known in Iran.

[82] Parsa (M)

Not Quite, Not White

In her memoir, Not Quite, Not White, author and Editorial Director of Harvard University Press, Sharmila Sen writes about her relationship with whiteness and discovering her racial identity. Sen grew up in Calcutta, India, and moved to the United States when she was twelve. In Calcutta, she did not identify with race, but her light skin, high caste, and socioeconomic status positioned her near the top of the societal hierarchy. In the United States, she experienced racial discrimination and low-socioeconomic status, but her racial identity as a light-skinned Indian of Bengali heritage in the United States was ambiguous. From a young age, she was aware of the sense of belonging that came with being white in her host society. Sen described her assimilation as putting on whiteface, she masked her heritage to belong and achieve success (Sen, 2018, 150).

> "I was an Ex-Indian woman who was supposed to act white without actually becoming white. Perversely this arrangement suited America's dominant culture as well. After all, imitation is the best form of flattery. By acting white, I was flattering the dominant culture. And by remaining Not Quite White, I posed no threat to white elites. I would forever be the light-skinned foreigner at the table" (Sen, 2018, 149).

By masking, Sen achieved an honorary white status, or what she calls Not Quite White. However, Not Quite White got her a seat at a table, but she was still labeled a foreigner outside the boundaries of belonging. Iranian Americans similarly find themselves on the boundaries of whiteness. Sociologist, Neda Maghbouleh describes the concept as "racial hinges", where "geographic, political, and pseudoscientific specter of racially liminal groups, like Iranians, can be marshaled by a variety of legal and extralegal actors into a symbolic hinge that opens or closes the door to whiteness as necessary" (Maghbouleh, 2017, 5). Iranian Americans are legally white and achieve certain proximity to whiteness, yet they also face racialized social experiences where white privilege is out of their reach. Maghbouleh describes the dissonance between Iranian American's

legal and social racial identity to fall into a "racial loophole", where the "everyday contradictions and conflicts that emerge when a group's legal racial categorization is inconsistent with its on-the-ground experience of racialization" (Maghbouleh, 2017, 5). In the interviews, I asked participants if they identify as white in the United States. Iranian Americans describe their experience on the edge of whiteness in the United States.

> "I mean the census says I'm supposed to put white. But recently I've just put Persian, I don't really know how to identify myself, like Middle Eastern, I guess. A lot of people call that area the Middle East. I identify myself as Persian. Don't really know where I can go to answer that question. Like do you know?"[83]

> "I always have problem identifying myself as one race because I consider myself, if you ask me directly, I consider myself as Middle Eastern. But there is no way I can, I can talk to someone and say I am from Middle East but on paperwork, on census, there is no place for that. I have to say I'm white. But I know that I am not white person. And that causes some problem for us because first of all, because I am from one minority let's say, I am Middle Eastern, when I want to apply for a job, I cannot use that option to say I'm minority. On the other hand, when someone sees my name, when someone talks to me in an interview and I have an accent, you can easily say, okay, this person is not white. So, I am not white, but I have to say I'm white."[84]

> "I don't connect with. I don't have anything against it, but I don't connect with it. I don't think have gone through the same experiences growing up here in the U.S. as an immigrant, and as a white person. It is obvious that I am different. I look different, I don't look white. In California, everybody is white, nobody looks, it is not a homogenous society. But let's say if I go to Wyoming or Texas, I am definitely, let's say if I am from Turkey, Greece, or Italy, most likely people won't notice I am not from the U.S. But if they see someone like me, they immediately ask where I am from. And that doesn't mean which state, that means which country, which part of the world. That question is not asked from a person who I consider white. And that means European, Australian, or European diaspora."[85]

> "Before coming to the U.S. I thought that was the best description. But after moving here, it seems that when they are describing a white person, they are mainly referring to a person with a background from Europe. Those that came here two or three centuries ago from Europe. Usually, they are being referred to as white. I don't know, if we are Middle Eastern or if we are brown."[86]

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[83] Mina (F)
[84] Ali (M)
[85] Parsa (M)
[86] Dariush (M)

> "I have a really hard time identifying as a race. I definitely consider myself a person of color, I don't identify myself as white."[87]

> "If I'm white, why did I get bullied for the hair on my body, why did a kid ask me, 'if I like Iranian or military better?' …. 'Why do you have hair on your hands? Do you like Iranian or military better?' I still got bullied because of my name because of who I was. It's like, oh you're a minority, and you're outspoken on top of that? You're definitely bound to get bullied. But if I was a white American, it would be totally different. So that's where I get confused on who I am."[88]

> "I can say I'm white on a job application, but they'll look at my name right, they'll know, 'oh she's not white. Her name doesn't sound white.' So, I think when employers look at that. If my name was white, and my name sounded white, the chances of me getting a job would be easier than a name like "—". That doesn't sound white."[89]

> "when I choose white, in front of that I always write Iranian because I want to show my background and I say that I'm Iranian, and that I'm here, and I'm people that live here. And maybe it influences their knowledge. Because there are not any other choices. [laughs] I think I'm brown! But there are not many choices for me. But they suggest I choose white because I'm not African American, I'm not Spanish, I'm not Indian, so I have to choose white! [laughs] But I always write in front of that Iranian."[90]

Almost all these responses reflect that Iranian Americans are aware that their perception and experience in the United States differs from that of white Americans. This is most blatantly felt in interactions with white Americans, where they are almost always treated as non-white or foreign other. This contradicts the whiteness Iranians inherited from the Aryan myth. Iranian Americans are aware and struggle with what Aryaye identity means when you are stripped of your whiteness. Some Iranian Americans break away from claiming whiteness and seek to reform their identity to fit their experiences in the host country.

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[87] Atoosa (F)
[88] Shirin (F)
[89] Shirin (F)
[90] Donya (F)

Middle Eastern American Social Experience

Iranian Americans have broken from the white identity in the United States. They also perceive that in the United States, they share common social experiences with other populations of Middle Eastern origin, such as Arabs, that they have formerly distinguished themselves from. Based on the lived racialized social experience in the United States, Iranian Americans find themselves reformulating their racial identity.

> "But I think in the west, like in the U.S., race and ethnicity is more about how you identify yourself right now. How are the situation? They define different kind of races because they know that there are some problems here. They want to solve these issues. Let's say that is why they categorize people. But people in Iran just want to connect themselves to that history. There are some problems in our own community, the Iranian American community, to solve these problems they need to be unified, and that is better to call themselves as a separate identity, race or ethnicity."[91]

This response identifies that racial identity in the United States is formed through social experiences that are shaped by race. This differs from the construction of racial identity in Iran, which is supported by historical and ideological narratives that the respondent is aware no longer hold meaning or describe their experience in the United States.

> "I can say Iran is one country in the Middle East, like other countries, and they don't- I mean that makes sense because of course they don't have much knowledge about different countries around the world, and they just, hear about Iran, or "eye-ran" for them [laughs], Iran is just one country in that area. So that's why they don't have any, they don't distinguish Iran with other countries in that area. That is why they call me Middle Eastern more than Iranian. In my opinion, it makes sense to be in that group or division because being an Iranian is not much different being a person or Iraq or Turkey or Afghanistan inside the United States. To me, race is more sociology, it is more about connection between people. I think from a person out of this circle, one person from Iran is somehow the same as from Iraq or Turkey. That is why I can group these people as one subgroup. Of course, there are very different things that are happening there and there are Persians are different from Turks or different from Arabs, there are different groups of people. But of course, I think grouping these people as Middle Eastern in future is beneficial for us, as Middle Eastern because we can unify, we can have an identity, and after years we can have our own identity as a group of people so we can fight for that. That is what I think is better to say that we are Middle Eastern that just saying we are Persian."[92]

[91] Ali (M)
[92] Ali (M)

> "I think it's a problem to say that I'm colorblind or that I don't want to put labels on people because it could further marginalize people by going about it that way. I think I've always been bothered by putting labels on myself. I'm just from Iran, I'm Iranian and I guess like because I never grew up thinking about my race, it's hard for me to identify racially because I always just knew myself and my family as Persians. So, I guess if I wanted to see an option on an application that I had to choose, I think, definitely having a separate Middle Eastern option. I think that would be good, because I definitely don't identify as white or Caucasian. Even if they still had that on a list, I would be appreciate being able to choose that I am Middle Eastern. Because being from Europe is different, western Europe is different."[93]

> "Right now, I would say I'm Iranian. Okay, I know that, again this goes back to, I do need to admit that even I don't have a 100% understanding of the difference between race and ethnicity- on a form or survey, I would put in as MENA in the question about race. So, I would say I'm from the MENA region, but I always call myself Iranian…. I do not feel comfortable with the MENA term- region being included in the Caucasian slash white category because obviously the MENA region includes the Middle Eastern and North Africa, and there is a very diverse group of people living in that region. If someone refers to me as white, I will say, 'oh, okay, yeah. It makes sense.' But I don't feel comfortable with MENA being included as white."[94]

When asked how they would choose to identify themselves if they could pick any label, respondents gave answers such as Iranian or Persian, or broader categories such as Middle Eastern or MENA (Middle Eastern North African). All these responses came along with the rationale that Iranian Americans are not white in the United States. Identifying with broader categories such as Middle Eastern American signifies that Iranian Americans are aware of their shared racialized social experience with other Muslim and Middle Eastern communities in the United States. These are populations that Iranian racial ideology distinguishes Iranians from. However, in the United States racial construction, the lines are redrawn. Iranian Americans are together with a broader group that faces the same forces of racialization. The last theme I discuss how Iranian Americans assert their identity in response to pressures to assimilate.

[93] Tara (F)
[94] Leila (F)

Pressure to Assimilate

When responding to questions about U.S. forces of assimilation, individuals resisted expressing assimilation as a pressure they faced. Instead, responses emphasized agency to determine what U.S.-centric behaviors and customs they choose to adopt, and what Iranian behaviors and customs they choose to abandon. These determinations also signify individuals' ability to express agency in a new and different society. More specifically, a relatively repressive society, like Iran, to one that, at least through surface-level rhetoric, values freedom and democracy, such as the United States. These responses do not minimize the real and aggressive forces of assimilation in the United States, but Iranian American's agency to navigate these forces to shape their quality of life. In My Shadow is My Skin, the anthology describes themes of "coding/decoding" as the process of navigating between the Iranian and American identities, where one does not feel like they fully belong in either culture (Whitney, 2020, 10). Assimilation may never have been a "straight-line" process, rather it means confronting the challenges, achievements, and boundaries of hyphenated identity. In many instances, the individuals' personal experiences and desires shaped how they navigated pressures to assimilate to U.S. society. For example, experience living in Iran with a marginalized identity influenced individuals' willingness to assimilate in the United States.

> "I've always been a confident person and I think that my experience as living as a minority in Iranian has really helped me understand that I do not have to change myself because no matter what others will find a reason to dislike me, and it's important to keep my own identity and stand up for what I believe in. I should not have to change who I am or what I believe in order to fit in because in the end it would not be worth it."[95]

> "It was not an external pressure. It was a more of an internal pressure. It wasn't, I didn't have, and this is very specific to me than maybe, a lot of, maybe the majority of Iranians. I think those of us who were Persian Bahais who came from Iran because of a situation of persecution did not leave

[95] Leila (F)

> Iran with good feelings. And so, especially being a child, I didn't have a lot of attachment to Iran, it was just kind of pain. And so, coming to American, then it was a strong internal push to leave everything Iranian behind and to become American as quickly as I could being a kid. Which being a kid, wasn't that challenging or hard. Whereas it was different for my parents for example, who still had a lot of attachment to Iran. A strong ambivalence and a tear kind of in their allegiance, in their heart in regard to still loving their home country and loving their adopted country. So, I think that was a different experience for them. There may have been more of an external pressure for them to assimilate."[96]

> "My mom because of everything that had happened to her in Iran, like all the persecution and jail and the civil war and all that, she just wanted to distance herself from that as much as possible. So. It was more of a safety mechanism for her. She was like I don't want to remember that. I just want to start fresh, start completely new."[97]

Family support was cited as an influence that empowered individuals to exercise their agency in adopting and abandoning customs. The age of the individual when they immigrated as well as immigrating alone or with family were also factors influencing response to pressures to assimilate.

> "I am growing up in the United States, was very much taught to not assimilate, and not become Americanized. That was the worst thing that could happen, the worst thing I could do to bring shame my family, was to become super Americanized and not be proud of the fact that I'm an Iranian family."[98]

> "when we came here, we completely assimilated, so I just completely erased my Persian identity, I'm recently trying to get it back…. I assimilated because I was a child and I was like, I want to make friends. [laughs] So in order to make friends and connect with people, I had to learn a different language and I had to behave in a way that was similar to my other friends. My dad, he is like the least assimilated one, he barely speaks English that much and all of these things. But I think his behavior assimilated in a way so he can make a living."[99]

> "When I came to the United States, I think I was too young, but definitely it has affected my- you know, its hard to say because I think when I'm in different situations, I think play with that. If I'm, like yesterday I had to go to court, and definitely, its toned down in court because of course I don't want to cause any- I want to keep focus on what I want to achieve. But outside of that, like if I'm in a- I think it depends, I think I have to test where I'm surrounded by. If I feel vulnerable, then I'm probably quieter. I think its fluid. I don't think I can say one thing. Because I definitely speak my mind, I definitely challenge somebody that challenges that, and I'm pretty blunt. Even during subtle

[96] Farbod (M)
[97] Tara (F)
[98] Soraya (F)
[99] Tara (F)

> situations, I speak my mind. But I think it shifts. I'm learning to shift with that a little bit, depending on what the situation is. Like if I'm half an hour outside of Seattle, I'm not going to be as challenging as I would be in Seattle where I know would be more safe probably."[100]

> "Yeah, I think as a teenager growing up in the United States, you try to have sleep overs and have dogs and cats. That's the easiest example. You're trying to be like your blonde friend Sandy, and that's just not going to happen…But you try to step out to like wear clothes that are similar to what they're wearing, or talk like them, or use the fact that you have a stronger command of the English language in some respects to get ahead. And really, maybe even at times as a teenager, put your parents down, whether you do it intentionally or not, but you do it because the rest of society does it. The rest of society is putting your parents down because they have an accent. And as a rebellious teenager who doesn't know who the heck you are, you take some of that oppression your parents are facing, and its internalized oppression, because by the time you do that and you put your community down, you're completely lost. You're completely lost. You have no idea where you come from. I think that's a struggle teenager growing up in the United States have to go through. Its this notion of you want to be so much like them and you can't, and one bad thing that you pick up from this American culture is putting others down, and they do that a lot. They do that a lot. Americans put others down, whether they are aware of it or not, this patronizing, condescending attitude that they have against others, I think as a person of an Iranian background I can sense it more than if I wasn't Iranian."[101]

> "Until you get out of that cycle and recognize that you're a hybrid. You don't belong to either one. You don't belong to either group. And you don't need to try to satisfy either group because they're both screwed up in some way. The Americans have so much that's lacking, but so do the Iranians, you know. And you can take the best out of both cultures. But to create that identity takes a lot more work, that if you and I had grown up in Iran, we wouldn't have had to go through that, or if we had American, you wouldn't have to go through that. But once you create that hybrid identity that makes sense to you, that's when you start to see the world, and you become more comfortable in your own skin, and you can better manage that internalized oppression that you're trying to use to belong into a society you'll never belong to, and you shouldn't try to belong to it because there's nothing about the pure-bred American society that's even that great, honestly. So, just be proud of who you are. But that takes a while. That takes a lot longer to be comfortable in your own skin when you have all these different ideologies and morals and values that always coexist and trying to figure out how to make that balance work for yourself."[102]

The desire for social mobility and securing a comfortable life is also an influence in how individual immigrant's respond to pressures to assimilate.

> "you cannot detect any clear racism behavior here [in Seattle]. But I have never seen before in this state, in this city. When I look at job, when I am in the class in college, I have never seen before. And I am very happy here. My first decision was to go to Texas. But when I studied about that and heard from some Iranian people in that state, they told me we seem some kind of behavior here because Texas is Republican. Some Republican assume as Iranian enemy. They told that they see

[100] Atoosa (F)
[101] Soraya (F)
[102] Soraya (F)

> this kind of behavior here. For example, when we are looking for job. Because of that I changed my mind and made that decision to come here."[103]

> "There are some behaviors associated with us, non-Americans, that we show, and when you do, it makes you stand out in a bad way. For example, when you are sitting in the room, and waiting for the meeting, and someone senior to you comes into the room, by nature I stand up behind them. Right? In here, you don't do that.… So, you have to learn how good behavior is described here and you behave accordingly…Who said that the way we did things in Iran is the best way? That is just one way to do it, here there is another way to do it. And in Rome, do as Romans do."[104]

Dina Nayeri is an Iranian American writer. In her book, *The Ungrateful Refugee*, Nayeri reflects on her own experience of seeking asylum as a young girl and provides her perspective on the rhetoric surrounding refugees, sympathy, and assimilation. Nayeri describes her assimilation as a series of acts of submission and performance (Nayeri, 2019, 6). The audience is native-born, who exchange appeals for sympathy and flattery with access to stability. The audience included teachers, employers, and peers. Assimilation does not feel like pressure because assimilation is calming. Where one experienced fear and uncertainty, one strived for assimilation to break the surface of such an existence. Later, when one has a moment to catch their breath and look around, comes the desire to undo the excesses of assimilation (Nayeri, 2019, 151).

Discussions in the framework of assimilation center on what is adapted by the immigrant. This perspective risks ignoring what is abandoned, and the consequences of distancing from one identity to proximate oneself to another. When assimilation is framed as a process with only positive benefits, it sacrifices remembering what is left behind. Assimilation is done more so out of necessity than because it is natural. Just because a process rests primarily in the subconscious does not make it fate.

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[103] Aria (M)
[104] Dariush (M)

Discussion and Conclusion

My research aimed to examine the construction of the Middle Eastern American racial identity and its position in the U.S. racial hierarchy. Interviews with first-generation Iranian Americans showcased re-occurring discussions related to proximity to whiteness, Iranian racial ideology, weighted identity, racialized political events, identity in the U.S., and pressure to assimilate. Racial identity in Iran is defined by a narrowing of Iran's ethnonational identity, excluding domestic and foreign others to reinforce the false narrative of Iran's Aryaye identity. Racial identity in the United States is broadened for Iranian Americans as they are lumped together with other immigrant communities sharing a similarly racialized social experience. The results suggest both home and host country racial ideology are present factors in renegotiating identity, the formation of the Middle Eastern American racial identity out of racialized political events, and the agency and awareness of immigrants navigating assimilation and racialization.

The underlying question that motivated my research was, is immigrant populations' social mobility determined by their proximity to whiteness? I expected these interviews to reveal that race consciousness is developed within the process of attaining upward social mobility because immigrants perceive successful social mobility/assimilation as proximating themself to whiteness. However, this question itself is ignorant of the import/export of racial ideas and neglects home country racial ideology. Interviews explored Iran's racial ideology, including discussions surrounding the Aryan myth, ethnocentrism, anti-Arab and anti-Black sentiments, and persecution of minorities. Iranian Americans did not come to the United States and assimilate into white society. For centuries Iranians had inherited white supremacist notions from colonial visitors, negotiated them with Iran's history and power structure, and reformulated these ideas to fit new national narratives and redraw boundaries of included and excluded

communities. While interviewees discussed racial ideas, they asserted that they did not consider these issues as racism when in Iran because Iranian society is not organized as an explicit racial hierarchy. Rather religion, ethnicity, and regional origin are the predominant determiners of marginalization. Entering the United States, an explicitly racialized society, Iranian Americans inherited new racial dynamics. Immigrants are informed by the ideology and dynamics of inclusion/exclusion in their home country and mesh this knowledge with new information on their host country's structure to navigate the host society.

What occurs next is a reformulation of one's identity. Interviewees spoke about awareness of their privilege and acknowledge being insulated from harsher discrimination by their lighter skin, educational attainment, and socioeconomic status. They also faced confusion and contradiction in the dissonance between their honorary white status in society and their street-level experience (Maghbouleh, 2020, 627). Their professional and academic achievements do not put them out of the reach of the ignorance, patronization, and prejudice their national origin evokes from members of the host society. Interviewees almost unanimously recognized the limits to their honorary whiteness, pointing out instances of racialization in media, policy, and everyday interactions. They articulated having a distinctly different social experience than white Americans, no matter how integrated they were in their professional and/or personal lives. Interviewees preferred identifying with a label outside of whiteness. Many suggested the label Middle Eastern American because they more strongly identify with the shared social experience of other populations from Muslim-majority countries or of Middle Eastern origin. This is a notable difference from formulations of Iranian identity in Iran that emphasized differences between Iranians and other populations in the Middle East.

In my original intentions with this research, I did consider the awareness and agency of immigrants in navigating forces of assimilation and racialization. Interviewees expressed their conscious response to cultural traits belonging to the dominant society. Immigrants negotiate the advantages of adapting to the host society and abandoning the home country's traits and values. However, some described assimilation as the conditions to belonging and social mobility. In this sense, pressures to assimilate are better described as forces of racialized oppression that are observably directed at immigrant populations. There is an opportunity for future research to delineate between the forces of assimilation and the forces of racialized oppression that immigrants interact with.

These interviews served as an investigation into immigrants' relationship with race and how it is informed by their experiences in this country to contextualize assimilation theory in the social construction of race. Exploring this question through the framework of social race construction illuminated novel interpretations of immigrant population's social trajectory by allowing to engage with the racialization of immigrants, reformulations of racial identity and racial ideology in a new state, and consciousness of the United States' racial hierarchy in determining social mobility. My research demonstrates the insights that can be drawn from studying immigrant populations' outcomes through the lens of social race construction that assimilationist studies do not accommodate.

In the literature review I gave an overview of the shortcomings of assimilationist theory for studying today's diverse immigration populations because of its obscuring, colorblind language. The immigrant experience of "learning race" speaks to the racialization of non-white communities in the United States. It is critical to the study of race and the study of immigration that scholars understand and acknowledge how non-white immigrant populations are integrated

into a racial hierarchy rather than a multicultural society. Assimilation theory does not capture the racialization of Iranian Americans and the Middle Eastern American community at large. The assimilation model is built on observations of immigration patterns that starkly contrast the contemporary United States' immigrant populace. However, even at the time of its conception, assimilation theory was blind to the experiences and exclusion of racial minorities whose communities have long been established in the United States. The language of assimilationist theory also neglected to identify the power dynamics between the immigrant populations and the dominant culture. Often assertions were made that forces of assimilation to a white-dominant society were natural and desirable. The assimilation model operated under a multitude of assumptions and ambiguities which make it an unsatisfactory framework for studying racialized immigration populations in the United States.

Studying immigrant populations from the lens of social race construction has several advantages over assimilation studies. Social race construction fully encompasses the social, fluid nature of race and the factors that form and transform racial identities over time. This framework also confronts the structural features that form the unique United States racial hierarchy and connects to transnational racial ideas that immigrants may have encountered, such as anti-Black racism, white supremacy, and orientalism. Applying a social race construction framework in the sociological study of immigration allows opportunities to explore the racialization of immigrant populations in shaping disparate social trajectories. Contradictions in legal, social, professional, and political identities do not undermine these explanations but are part of the process of identity-building and understanding group outcomes.

These theoretical tools are valuable for civil organizing within the Middle Eastern American community for broader legal protections and social awareness. Scholars have forth

extensive evidence of the lack of legal protections as a consequence of Middle Eastern Americans existing in a "racial loophole" of legal whiteness but social racialization (Maghbouleh, 2017, 5). Acknowledging the problematic roots of conflating Iranian and Aryan racial identity can begin to shed light on the contradictions found in Iranians' honorary white identity. The Iranian American and larger Middle Eastern community organized to defend its civil liberties in the aftermath of 9/11 and the proliferation of Islamophobic legislation and prejudice. Scholars acknowledge that the events surrounding the War on Terror are also largely responsible for the racialization of Middle Eastern Americans (Love, 2017, 87). These protections can be expanded to protect this community from not only religious-based discrimination but racial discrimination as well. Middle Eastern American activists have recently advocated for changes in the legal identity of Middle Eastern and North Africans to be separated from the white category to a separate category. UW's Middle Eastern Student Commission launched a campaign to call on the Washington legislature to incorporate a MENA category on all Washington State-issued documents (Source). The future of Middle Eastern community organizing is in racial justice issues and studying the racialization of immigrant populations of Middle Eastern origin can inform organizing strategies.

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