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Iranians in Texas: Migration, Politics, and Ethnic Identity

by Mohsen Mobasher (review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

MOHSEN MOBASHER, *Iranians in Texas: Migration, Politics, and Ethnic Identity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012). Pp. 211. \$55.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper.

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In this book, Mohsen Mobasher calls on social scientists to take a new look at the migration struggles of Iranian Americans in light of the recent surge in scholarship on Arab and Muslim Americans. He rightly points out that there are similarities in the ways in which Iranians, after the Iran hostage crisis, and Muslims, after 9/11, came under suspicion and had their civil rights compromised. For example, the requirement of the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System of 2002 that non-citizens from Muslim-majority countries register their whereabouts with the government resembles orders issued by Attorney General Benjamin Civiletti after the seizure of American hostages by Iranian revolutionaries requiring all Iranians to report their location and visa status to the nearest INS office. Anti-Iranian sentiments increased dramatically as a result of the hostage crisis just as anti-Muslim sentiments rose after 9/11. As attested by the 1981 publication of Edward Said's classical study, *Covering Islam*, the Iran hostage crisis also brought to the fore the problems with media coverage of Islam and Middle Easterners in the United States, a problem that scholars have revisited in numerous publications since 9/11.

Given these similarities, it is indeed surprising, if not negligent, for scholars of immigration and Middle Eastern diasporas not to pay more attention to the experiences of Iranian Americans. *Iranians in Texas* is by no means the final word on Iranian Americans, but it is a laudable step forward toward the incorporation of the distinctive experiences of Iranian Americans in U.S. immigration and ethnic history.

The dearth of data on Iranian Americans and the lack of scholarly conversation partners for Mobasher are palpable throughout *Iranians in Texas*. Mobasher relies heavily on his personal experiences and even dedicates chapter 1 to his own life story. His story is typical and as such serves as an example of the lives of the tens of thousands of Iranian students who came to the United States and ended up remaining after the Iranian revolution of 1979 and becoming successful professionals. Yet, his personal experiences also color his conclusions in a way that is distinctive. He writes, "Despite my U.S. citizenship, thirty years of residence in this country, and

professional affiliations and contributions, I feel socially and legally as vulnerable and insecure as I did when I had a student visa and was attending a Dallas high school during the hostage crisis in 1979” (p. 46). He substantiates this sentiment by telling readers about his selection for “‘random’ enhanced screening” at Reagan National Airport after 9/11 (p. 47). He then goes to reiterate his personal conclusions about the sociopolitical predicament of Iranian Americans in more generalized terms: “Although nearly three decades have passed since the hostage crisis, unfortunately the story of Iran and Iranian immigrants remains unpleasant, and the distorted generalizations and stereotypes about Iranians persist and are widespread in the United States” (p. 47). One could easily find Iranian Americans who do not share Mobasher’s sense of insecurity and take issue with his description of their story as “unpleasant.” After all, as Mobasher himself states, Iranian Americans are one of the most educated and well-off ethnic communities in the United States.

By pointing to a correlation between Mobasher’s personal sentiments and his scholarly conclusion, I do not mean to suggest that his book is unscholarly. Rather, my point is that Mobasher is able to draw attention to how international politics affect immigrant communities’ self-understanding and integration into American society because he takes his own personal experiences seriously.

In the remaining chapters of the book, in addition to his personal experiences, Mobasher also draws on governmental sources as well as surveys he conducted among Iranians in Texas, primarily in Houston, Dallas, and Austin. He completed a survey of 485 first-generation Iranians in 1994 and conducted two other surveys in 2003-2004. One included a non-random sample of 105 Iranians who were American-born or raised in the United States. The second included 507 Iranians who came to the United States as adults.

Drawing on these different sources, he argues that U.S. and Iranian policies have posed a number of dilemmas for Iranian Americans, which they have not been able to resolve. First, the hostage crisis, during which Iranians were vilified, “spoiled” Iranian identity for Iranian Americans before they had even decided to settle in the United States. Upon settling in the United States, they have had to decide whether or not to claim an Iranian identity and risk suffering the stigma that comes with it. The establishment of a restrictive Islamic government in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution has also made it difficult for Iranian Muslims to practice their faith without seeming to support the Islamic regime whose domestic policies many of them view as draconian. Second, not only are Iranian Americans ambivalent about adopting an Iranian identity, the stigmatization of Iran in U.S. politics also makes Iranian Americans ambivalent about claiming an American identity.

This “double ambivalence,” Mobasher argues, is not the result of Iranian American psychology during a state of transition but rather results from a feeling of being “simultaneously repelled from two hostile societies due to concurrent political confrontation and exclusion from each without options for either return or integration” (p. 92). The third dilemma facing Iranian Americans, according to Mobasher, is the dilemma of how to preserve their cultural heritage and ethnic values while at same time integrating into a society that views them negatively.

Mobasher argues that Iranian Americans’ struggle to address these dilemmas have resulted in an “institutional crisis” within the Iranian American community. First-generation Iranian Americans generally avoided building cultural, religious, or ethnic institutions because of the Iranian American identity had been “spoiled” by the Iran hostage crisis. They thus retreated to the private realm and made their families the central social organization through which they transferred their values to the next generation and resisted cultural alienation. The Iranian family in the diaspora, however, was itself weakened by immigration policies on the one hand and on the growing independence of women. As middle-class women came to work outside of the home in larger numbers, both in Iran and in the United States, the “ideal Iranian family,” which according to Mobasher is patriarchal, was challenged. The institution of the family upon which Iranian Americans had relied to establish their values was thus strained, and Iranian Americans were left with the formidable task of marrying “the core opposing values of individualism, attainment of personal gains, sexual satisfaction, and career advancement encouraged by American culture with collectivism, making sacrifices for their children and other family members, and loyalty and commitment to family needs embedded in and cultivated by the Iranian culture” (p. 156).

None of what Mobasher relates in *Iranians in Texas* is unfamiliar to students of Middle Eastern diasporas who have some knowledge of Iranian American history. What is noteworthy in this book is Mobasher’s interpretation of his data. In many ways, *Iranians in Texas* is an effort to explain the lack of belonging Mobasher himself feels through the macroscopic lens of Iranian and American politics. I hope I have made the merits of such an approach obvious in my brief summary of the book’s main arguments, but I should also state that such an approach overlooks the other side of the story in which Iranian American identities and institutions are shaped by the internal dynamics of Iranian American communities. By way of example, the dilemma of openly practicing Islam or proclaiming an Iranian identity have as much to do with how Islam and Iranian identity were “spoiled” by the hostage crisis as they do with the internal divisions and rivalries between Iranians of varying classes and ideological backgrounds. Iranian Americans reflect religious and political divisions within Iran that historically produced the revolution and the policies of the Islamic republic. Had Mobasher paid

more attention to the micropolitics of Iranian Texans, he would have written a richer and more comprehensive book, but he would have also risked softening his cry for scholars to examine more carefully the experiences of Iranian Americans for what it reveals about the effects of transnational politics on ethnic community building in America.