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## Strange Patterns in Migration Flows from Iran

By David North

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Some flows across borders are roughly reciprocal, with people, goods, and services running in both directions and better illustrated with gentle curves than with sharp peaks and valleys. Some, notably the flows between Iran and the United States, are quite one-sided and marked by sudden movements up and down.

Let's take our border with Mexico as an example of the more typical set of exchanges. Yes, more workers (legal and illegal) arrive rather than depart, while tourism runs in the other direction. Years ago, and maybe still, residents of the borderlands bopped back and forth, seeking economic advantage; in broad general terms, many Americans bought dental services, bread, and auto body repairs south of the border, and medical services, meat, and auto motor repairs north of it.

Further, some to many people born in Mexico who subsequently work for years in the United States retire to Mexico with Social Security checks. Some Americans also have their retirement checks mailed to them in Mexico.

And then there are our migration relations with Iran, which appear to be more lopsided than with any other country, and more abrupt in their changes from time to time. On one hand there is an avid desire among millions in Iran to come to the Land of Satan, but there is virtually no traffic the other way.

Let's take two of the flows from Iran that can be graphed easily; the number of foreign students present in this country and the annual arrival of immigrants. Since there are roughly one million new immigrants a year, and since there are a little less than one million foreign students in residence, one would expect that the two subtotals for a specific country would be pretty much the same. Not so for Iran, which had far more students than immigrants in 1975 and 1980, and generally more migrants than students in the years since (see Figure 1).

When the late shah was alive, he had the idea that university students might be a threat to his imperial regime, so he subsidized the out-migration of young people; as a result, for a number of years (1974 to 1983) there were more foreign students from that nation in the United States than from any other.

The shah was correct to worry about a revolution, but it came from the religious far right, not from the student left. The dictatorial monarch was forced out of office in February 1979, to be succeeded by the even more dictatorial supreme ruler, the Ayatollah Khomeini. In November of that year Iranian students (and anti-American thugs) took over our embassy in Tehran, presumably with the assent of the ayatollah, and held it till January 1981. (At this point, as Figure 1 shows, there were more than 50,000 Iranian students in our colleges and universities.)

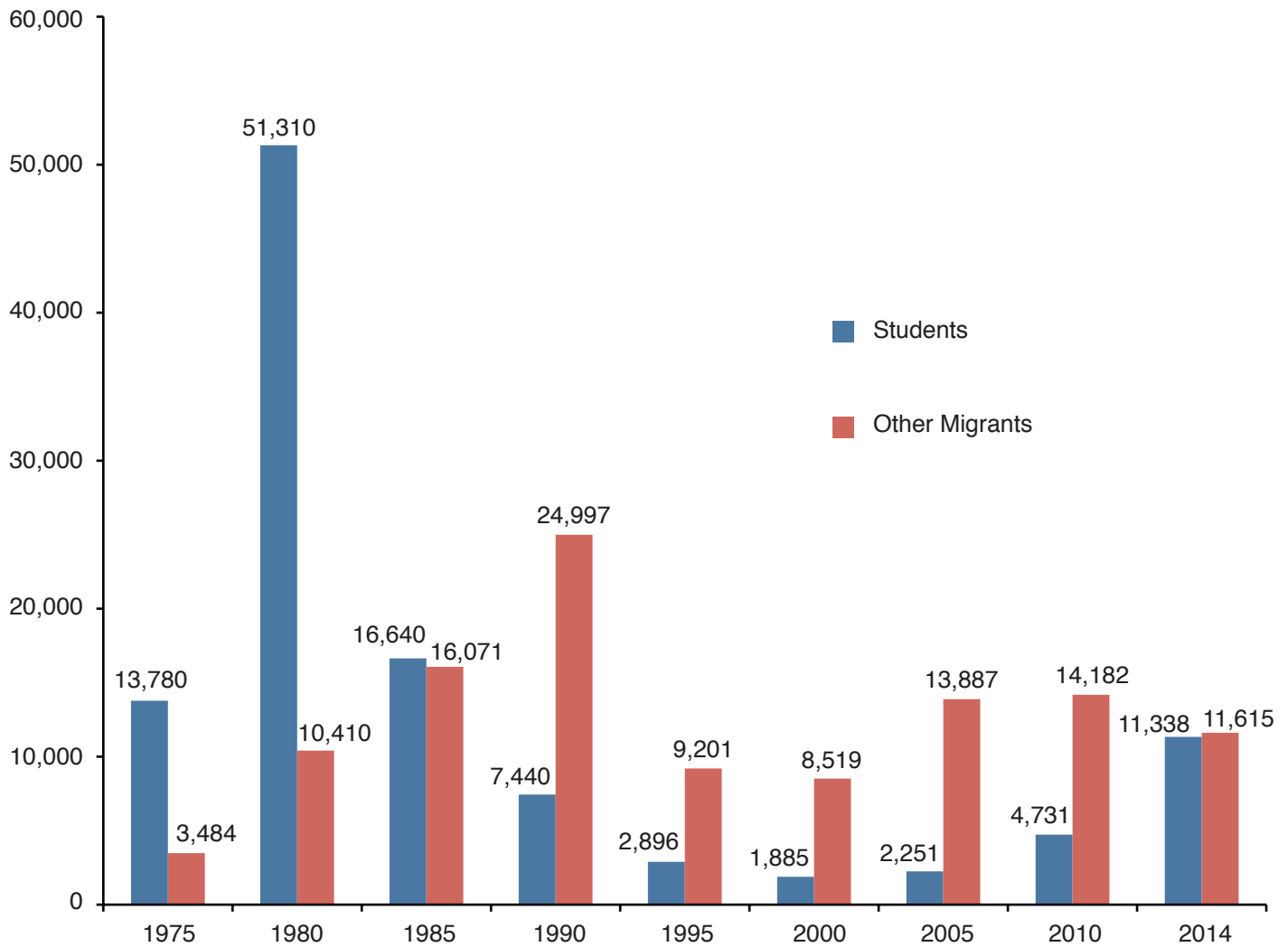
President Jimmy Carter then decided that if Iranian "students" were going to cause us dire problems in Tehran, then maybe we should get rid of at least some of them in this country. I suspect that the political leanings of those who seized the embassy and the run of the mill Iranian students here were quite different, but apparently Carter felt that he had to do something. He discovered, to his surprise but not to that of immigration professionals, that the then Immigration and Naturalization Service did not have a good handle on how many Iranian students were in this country, and certainly did not know where the individuals were located.

Carter ordered all Iranian students to register at INS offices and called for the deportation of many of them; what happened to the formal deportations is not clear. According a current Breitbart report, a U.S. Court of Appeals decision allowed the deportation of some 7,000 students, with September 22, 1980, newspaper articles saying only 2,000 had been ordered to leave the country by that date; other accounts told of much larger numbers leaving voluntarily.<sup>1</sup>

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*David North is a fellow at the Center for Immigration Studies.*

Figure 1. Iranian Students and Other Migrants to the U.S., 1975-2014



**Source:** Student data from various editions of *Open Doors*, New York: Institute for International Education; migrant data from various editions of *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, Washington, DC: U.S. Departments of Justice and Homeland Security.

These American reactions, coupled with the termination of the shah’s subsidies, caused the number of Iranian students in the United States to drop sharply, if not immediately, and to stay at minimal levels for a long time. The number of Iranian students in the United States, however, has increased in more recent years and, in 2014, stood at a little more than 10,000.

**The Current Imbalance in the Exchange of Students.** The general picture, for all nations, of foreigners studying here and our people studying abroad is that there is much more of the former than the latter, as we showed in a blog post earlier this year.<sup>2</sup> In the 2013/2014 academic year, there were about three foreign students in the United States for every one of ours abroad, and ours tended to stay for shorter periods than theirs did.

That 3:1 ratio can be compared to the balance of Iranian students here to our students there. That ratio, according to statistics we gleaned from different parts of *Open Doors*,<sup>3</sup> the Institute of International Education’s annual census of foreign students, was 680 (*from Iran*) to 1 (*to Iran*) in 2013-2014.

The raw numbers that year were 10,194 students *from* Iran compared to 15 *to* Iran. A year earlier our student delegation in Iran consisted of two people, according to *Open Doors*.

The imbalance persists even among Americans funded by the U.S. government to learn Farsi overseas, for diplomatic and security purposes. We do not send people to Iran for such training, we ship them off to Tajikistan, another place where Farsi is spoken.<sup>4</sup> It is as if the Russians could not send their people to the United States or the United Kingdom to learn English, and opted to send them to Belize instead. Strange.

There is not only an imbalance between our students and theirs, there is also the unusual ratio of grad students to all students from Iran. Again using *Open Doors*, we find that, generally, 37.2 percent of foreign students are seeking graduate degrees, but that 79.0 percent of those from Iran are at the graduate level; this is more than twice the overall percentage.<sup>5</sup>

This is significant because there is a difference, by level, of who finances higher education; there is much more family support at the bachelor's and master's levels than there is at the PhD level; the better American schools tend to provide full support for their doctoral students.

I see all of this at a micro level every spring when I volunteer to help graduate students with their income taxes at a major D.C.-area university. Most of those my colleagues and I help are foreign students, as they are less accustomed to income taxes than Americans. Every year I encounter half a dozen Iranian students, and every one I have met is seeking a PhD, mostly in the high tech fields such as electrical engineering and physics. I can tell from their income tax returns that almost all of their income is from the university (and that, in turn, comes mostly from tax sources).

The United States is therefore deeply subsidizing high-quality, highly technical educations for people from a country on which we have heaped, until recently, a load of economic sanctions. The only compensation for this practice is that aliens with PhDs tend to stay in the United States and not return home.<sup>6</sup> Iranians are even more likely to stay than other foreign PhDs.

One of the oddities of this arrangement is that until recently U.S. employers had to go through an extra set of government hoops to hire Iranians in high-tech jobs *because* of the sanctions. With this in mind I started asking the Iranians what they did in the summer; their response was that they usually went home or continued to work for the university. In short, they were much less likely to secure private-sector summer funding than their peers, and thus were more costly than their peers to the university. The one subject that the universities cannot teach Iranians is nuclear physics, but they can deal with what I, as a non-scientist, regard as neighboring subjects.

Meanwhile, the slowly growing flow of international students from Iran to the United States takes place despite the chilly, even hostile, relations between the two governments. One of the obstacles to this flow is the lack of an American embassy in Tehran, which has been closed for obvious reasons.

Iranians who have secured admission to an American educational institution cannot secure an American visa in their own nation and have to travel to get one, usually to Dubai. This was not regarded by those I interviewed as a major problem. "Dubai's a non-stop flight from Tehran," one of them told me; "It costs about \$300 round trip and you can make an appointment with the embassy in advance, so it is a one-day outing." We, by definition, never get to see the ones who *are* daunted by these arrangements.

The English language skills of the Iranians I see every year are good, by the way, far better than the much more numerous Chinese, if not quite up to the level of the students from India.

**Other Migration Patterns.** The relative attractiveness of living in Iran as opposed to the United States can be seen in three measures, two of which relate to populations that have lived in both countries, while the third consists of people who are now in Iran but would rather be in the United States. Both measures show dramatic differences.

Perhaps the more obvious of these is the extent to which residents of Iran take the 1/500 chance of winning our visa lottery. In the most recent of these exercises there were 932,346 applicants for the lottery from Iran.<sup>7</sup> One needs to be a high school graduate or someone with two years of specialized training to file, which eliminates most people under the age of 18. There is no fee levied unless a visa is won. Filings are done on the internet, which eliminates some who are either not computer-literate or unable to hire someone who is capable of filing the fairly simple application.

The only nations with more filings than Iran are Ghana, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine. By this measure the United States is clearly highly attractive to people in Iran.

The other two measures — a pair usually not compared to each other — are the number of people securing permanent resident alien status each year in the United States, and the number of people who have left the United States and have taken their retirement checks back to the homeland. Typically, according to the reports of the agencies involved, there are about a million new resident aliens each year; and about 600,000 people receive their Social Security checks in other nations, so, globally, there is a 100/60 ratio. This can also be expressed as a 3,000/1,800 ratio.

But this is not the case for Iran. There were 11,615 new immigrants in 2014, and exactly four Iran-resident Social Security beneficiaries, or an approximately 3,000/1 ratio; not the 3,000/1,800, the global norm.

If people get out of Iran and make it to America, there is virtually no flow back at retirement time. (Social Security does not publish data on nations<sup>8</sup> where there are fewer than 500 recipients, but, when we asked about the Iranian number, they said it was four in December 2014.)

Table 1 sums up these measured reactions to migration from or to Iran.

If Iran's situation were like that of most nations, there would not be the 20th vs. 127th comparison as seen in Table 1, both rankings would be in the neighborhood of 20th.

Another way to look at it is this: If Iran had the usual balance between incoming migrants (11,615) and outgoing Social Security checks, there would be 6,969 checks a month going to Iran. But the 6,969 estimated potential Iranian retirees have voted 6,965 to four that they would rather be in the States than in Iran.

What a thumping vote of no confidence in the old country!

In the last few years, the total legal immigration from Iran has been slowly shrinking while the percentage of new migrants benefitting from the Visa Lottery has been increasing, as Table 2 shows.

Again, comparing the situation with Iran to the global migration picture, we see that Iranian immigrants are much more likely to use the Visa Lottery than migrants generally. Roughly 5 percent of new migrants to the United States come through the Visa Lottery program, but the average is five times higher for migrants from Iran.

Were the United States to terminate the Visa Lottery — we are the only nation in the world with a large-scale program of this kind — Iranian migration to the United States would drop by a quarter.

Given the thaw in U.S.-Iran relations, the freeing of previously blocked funds now available to the government (and presumably more funds to some individual Iranians), and the possibility of re-opening an American embassy, the chances are that the arrivals of students and other migrants from Iran will increase in the future. And maybe in 2016 the number of Iranians joining the Visa Lottery will again — as in 2014 — top one million.

Whether those same forces will also increase student movements from here to there is another question.

**Table 1. Measures of Migration Between the U.S. and Iran**

Migration Measure	Totals in Most Recent Year	Iran's Rank Among nations
Visa Lottery Applications	932,346	4th
Arriving Immigrants in U.S.	11,615	20th
Returning Retirees to Iran	4	127th

**Source:** Latest statistical reports of the U.S. Departments of State and Homeland Security and of the Social Security Administration. For specifics, see end notes.

**Table 2. Visa Lottery Beneficiaries and Total Migration from Iran, 2011-2014**

Year	Visa Lottery Beneficiaries	Total Migration to the U.S.	Percentage of Lottery Beneficiaries
2011	1,783	14,822	12.0%
2012	2,262	12,916	17.5%
2013	3,447	12,863	26.8%
2014	2,897	11,615	25.1%

**Source:** U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, 2011-2014, Table 10.

# End Notes

<sup>1</sup> [“Flashback: President Jimmy Carter Bans All Iranians from U.S.”](#), Breitbart, December 9, 2015; [“Officials Estimate 12,000 Iranian Students Still in U.S. Illegally”](#), *Indianapolis Star*, September 22, 1980; the 1979 and 1980 *Statistical Year Books* of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Tables 24 C and 39, respectively, show 389 Iranians (1979) and 1,234 (1980) being “required to depart”, a somewhat broader definition than “deported”.

<sup>2</sup> David North, [“Emigration Note: The Two-Way Movements of College Students”](#), Center for Immigration Studies blog, June 10, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> [Open Doors 2015](#), New York: Institute for International Education, 2016, Tables 1.15, and 2.7.

<sup>4</sup> Shirin Jaafari, [“Here’s Why the United States is Sending U.S. Students to Tajikistan to Learn Farsi”](#), PRI’s “The World”, October 29, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> *Open Doors, op.cit.*, Table 1.15.

<sup>6</sup> David North, [“Big Majority of Foreign PhDs Stay in the U.S. Many Years After Degrees”](#), Center for Immigration Studies blog, January 19, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> [“Diversity Visa Program, DV 2013-2015: Number of Entries Received During Each Online Registration Period by Country of Chargeability”](#), U.S. Department of State, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> [“Annual Statistical Supplement to the Social Security Bulletin, 2015”](#), Social Security Administration, 2015, Table 5.J11.