Homeland and Hostland
Iranian Press in Canada

More than ever, new communication technologies contribute to the collapse of time and space. Round-the-clock television and radio programming in Persian is available to diasporic communities around the world via satellite and the internet. Print journalism is also extensive in major urban centres.

Where is the homeland?
The following newspapers, mostly weekly, were published in Toronto in 2000: Iran Estar (Iran Star), Iran-e Javan (Young Iran), Iran Tribune, Ingham Post, Javan (Youth), Sahand (Hello Toronto), Sarmaye (Capital), Sepid (White Poplar), and Shahrvand (Citizen). All are secular, privately owned, financed primarily through advertising income, and distributed free of charge in places frequented by the targeted readership (grocery stores, restaurants, video and bookstores).

Quoted out of context, Sa'di’s couplet seems to be a call for detaching oneself from community and place of birth. Later in the poem, however, he celebrates the ties that bind people together and asks: ‘Who will stay away from the affection of a friend. Which lover will turn away from the intimacy of a beloved?’ Sa’di was probably not contradicting himself if we see detachment and attachement not in isolation but as constituents of a dialectical relationship.

The Iranian diaspora of Canada
The number of Iranian immigrants in Canada was approximately 100 in 1961 and increased to 660 by 1970. According to the 1996 census figures, Persian, the official or state language of Iran, was the ‘mother tongue’ of 60,275 Canadians (out of a population of 28,846,261). It ranked 17th among some 110 non-official languages of the country (English and French being the only official languages).

Canada is a country of the ideal ‘civic nation’ system in which citizenship is not based on relations of blood, ethnicity, language, religion, or national origin. The overwhelming majority of Iranian-born Canadians acquired Canadian citizenship without rejecting their previous citizenship. Iranian presence can already be felt in the major urban centres. There are Iranian grocery stores, mosques, restaurants, travel agencies, driving schools, bookstores, and Persian language sections in public libraries. Persian signs can be seen in some business quarters.

The treatment of Iranian Canadians of Christian faith shows a similar trend of attachment to Iran. Like the papers published in Iran, the Persian language press of Canada also contributed to Western governments’ adoption of policies to restrict the admission of new citizens to their diasporas in the West, the instability of the Islamic state together with its policies of restricting the return to Iran and return again to their diaspora. It also contributed to Western governments’ adoption of policies to restrict the admission of new citizens to their diasporas.

Struggle for control of the diaspora
If Iranian Canadians continue to be attached to their first homeland, the Islamic state too continues to regard them as Iranian citizens. Initially Tehran’s policy was the rejection of emigrants as ‘counter-revolutionaries’ who had betrayed both Islam and Iran. A more tolerant approach was adopted in the early 1990s in order to encourage their return to Iran and to stem the exodus. Although this policy failed, it has allowed many refugees to travel to Iran and return again to their diaspora.

Equally noteworthy is the treatment of the indigenous population of Canada. Since the 19th century, Iranian perceptions of Canada and the United States have been shaped by colonialist politics and discourses. Thus many Iranian Canadians continue to label aboriginal peoples collectively as ‘oil-pumpjacks’ (i.e. redskins) and refer to the Inuit people of the Arctic region as eskimos; these derogatory labels are not used in Canada today.

In the civic nation of Canada, extra-legal dynamics of inequality – racial, cultural, economic, social, and political – reinforce the attachment of new citizens to their ethnic, religious, racial, and national roots. Some Iranian Canadians use the word gharib-e (stranger) to describe themselves. The author of a series of articles dealing with the census data about Iranian Canadians chose the title ‘Stranger in the land of strangers’.

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pression continue to create new waves of emigrants, including highly skilled groups, professionals, investors and the youth. Twenty years after the revolution, diasporas have gained in importance and they impact in diverse ways the political environment in Iran. Some members of the exilic community engage in political activism aimed variously at the reform or overthrow of the Islamic regime. Moreover, members of the diaspora influence the foreign policy of the countries where they have become new citizens. Not surprisingly, a struggle has ensued over the control of the diaspora.

Iran’s policy of controlling the diaspora is complex, diverse, and implemented through the chain of embassies, consulates and all the power that diplomacy and statehood bring into play. Moreover, Tehran uses satellite broadcasting; allows artists, film makers, films, singers, and sport teams to travel abroad; builds mosques and religious centres; offers material rewards for those using these services; and gathers information on exilic communities.

The opposition in exile was quick to note the shift in policy. Debates have been going on about the extension of state repression to the diaspora and how to confront it. According to one political trend, the Islamic regime should not be allowed any space in the diaspora. This involves a boycott of its export products, sports and art groups, and other intellectual inroads into the exilic community. It also dismisses return to the homeland, or engaging in intellectual and publishing activities there. However, a large number of Iranians who do not support the Islamic state demonstrated strong attachment to their first homeland when a soccer team visited Australia, Canada and the U.S. in the late 1990s. The visit of the pop singer Googoosh to Canada and the U.S. in 2000 also rallied tens of thousands of nostalgic audiences to her performances. She had been denied the freedom to perform in Iran since 1979.

The de-territorialization of a sizeable population of Iranian dissidents has a far-reaching impact on the political destinies of Iran. Today, the struggle between the diaspora and the Islamic state goes on everywhere – at conferences and demonstrations, in print and broadcast media, and on the internet. However, convergence of political interest between the two sides has developed in the wake of the rise of ‘the reformist movement’ in and outside the government. Browsing through the diaspora press, it is often difficult to distinguish between the reformist trend in Iran and in exile.

Notes
1. These are quotations from the first part of a well-known panegyric qaisda by Sa’di.
5. Ibd.
6. The exact words, sel-e now-e miladi et be ‘ronen-e hamastande v massi-i radik miga/Im, can be found in other papers (e.g. Sibehsh, Vol. 1, No. 1, January 1998, p. 21).
7. See, for instance, Himani Banerjee (2000), The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender, Toronto: Canadian Scholar’s Press.
8. Navid Azadi, ibib. footnote 3 above.

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