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# Upward Mobility, Despite a Stigmatised Identity: Immigrants of Iranian Origin in Sweden

RESEARCH

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## ABSTRACT

This study is about a relatively recent immigrant group — those with an Iranian background — and their pathways to advanced positions in the three fields of economics, politics and academia in Swedish society, despite the general processes of stigmatisation and subordination aimed at migrants from the global South. As the results of this study show, compared with other immigrant groups from the global South, individuals with an Iranian background, to a greater extent, were able to attain high-ranking positions in the fields of power investigated. These outcomes, as the results show, emerge from the resources that this group brought with them — their cultural and social capital — in interaction with external factors in their new country of residence (Sweden) over a specific time period.



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## INTRODUCTION

The present study is about immigrants with an Iranian background living in Sweden who have attained top positions in the fields of economics, politics and academia in Sweden. Even though individuals from the global South have traditionally been placed in the lower strata of the class hierarchy in Sweden, data presented in this study reveal the increased presence of these migrants in spaces of which they have not before been a natural part (i.e. high-ranking positions). Even if slow and uneven, their incorporation into the fields of power still indicates a moment of change.

The main task of this article is to describe the current position of one group of these 'others' in 'privileged' positions in economics, politics and academia and to illuminate how they have carved out exceptional careers in these areas, in spite of the challenges and barriers. As will become clear in the following, these privileged positions have not been distributed equally among all categories of stigmatised migrants. The pathway to success of Iranian migrants in Sweden demonstrates the exceptional achievements, which can be realised and which are noted in the literature on upwardly mobile migrants (Crul et al. 2017a), highly skilled immigrants (e.g. Ryan & Mulholland 2014) and diaspora studies (e.g. Mobasher 2018).

The dominant focus of European migration research has been on the obstacles that migrants encounter (e.g. on entering the labour market) and its deprivatory consequences, with the implicit assumption that they enter the new country of residence at the bottom of the ladder. Consequently, as a review of previous studies shows (Crul et al. 2017b), research related to the 'successful' careers of migrants has not been the subject of many European studies in the field of international migration. Because of this scarcity of research, this study can contribute to the development of knowledge about the new patterns of social mobility among individuals with an immigrant background in the European context.

The three fields of economics, politics and academia, as examples of fields of power, were included in the (PoS) project, of which this study is a part. As Kelly (2017: 104) writes respecting 'successful' careers of migrants; ' "Success" is a socially constructed concept' with various meanings. The concept of 'success' in this project referred to Everett Hughes' (1958) definition of 'objective' career success as directly observable, measurable and verifiable attainments, such as income and occupational status. Immigrants in 'privileged' positions (in economics, politics and academia fields) in this project are thus; those with distinct positions of authority at the top of these social fields in which various forms of social power circulate and concentrate (for the indicators used to identify members of the 'privileged' positions of each field, see the following).

As numerous previous studies have demonstrated, immigrants with an Iranian background, like other non-European immigrants, have been vulnerable to stigmatisation and discrimination (Khosravi 2018). A pertinent issue is then whether their 'success' has guaranteed their acceptance — that is, whether the beliefs of the majority population have changed with this group's present position. The following research questions guide my study:

1. What is the status of individuals with an Iranian background among the holders of top positions in the economic, political and academic fields in Sweden?
2. Which factors can explain the outcomes that were observed?
3. How is this group viewed by the majority Swedish population, given their achievements?

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After a short discussion of the state of the art in this research area and a description of Iranian immigration to Sweden, the position of the different groups of immigrants among the holders of top positions is presented. Then, the outcomes of individuals with an Iranian background and the factors that explain these are introduced. The penultimate section shows how people in this group are viewed by the majority of the Swedish population, before the paper finishes with a conclusion.

## MIGRATION AND CAREER PATHWAYS

Current theories on social stratification and the role of the different forms of capital in this process provide important insights into how social groups and individuals play out a constant struggle to achieve the top positions in society (Bourdieu 1998). Those on the upper echelons of society exploit the resources they possess (economic, cultural and social capital) in order to maintain their own advantageous position and to reproduce their advantages in subsequent generations (Bourdieu 2001).

As Olsson (2021:21) mentioned, in contrast to the United States, research on the 'successful groups' of immigrants is a new topic in Europe and 'limited to a few exclusive examples'. Reviewing the few existing European studies, Crul et al. (2017a: 211) emphasise that 'new upcoming elites' among immigrants and their descendants who have gained 'entry into high-ranking positions of leadership…deserve special attention' in European research. As their 'pathway to success' reveals 'new patterns of social mobility' and 'alternative routes to achieving a successful position', such research can expand the theoretical foundation of the field in the European context. Their experiences, 'success against all the odds' and their tackling of serious barriers (like discrimination and entrance into an environment with specific cultural codes without any earlier inhabitation) exhibit new knowledge (Crul et al. 2017b: 214).

Among these few studies, de Wenden (1995) was one of the first in Europe to study political elites and the emerging leaders of immigrant descent in France. Crul, investigating successful descendant of Turkish and Moroccan immigrants in the Netherlands, emphasised the importance of structural factors in the educational system that affects their career (Crul 2000). Schnell et al. (2013), by drawing on comparative analyses of successful descendant of Turks immigrants from disadvantaged family backgrounds in France and the Netherlands, demonstrated the importance of institutional arrangements and their interactions with individual resources to account for these successes. Santelli (2013) conducted research on descendants of Algerian immigrants in France who had obtained a leading or an entrepreneurial position and denoted how they had managed to obtain higher education diplomas and occupy top executive positions. In line with Bourdieu's theories (2001), Leivestad & Olsson (2020) concluded that the immigrant groups' 'success stories' should be understood as their capacity to mediate or 'transform' their resources (different forms of capital) in their new country of residence. In this context, Erel (2010: 649) warns us to consider notions of cultural capital and skills in migration as historically and geographically specific. During the process of negotiations for recognition of their skills, 'the migrants' treasures are often undervalued', as they have limited power over the rules of the game. Olsson (2021:21) as well emphasises that previous research 'shows that the pathways to advanced positions are, in many respects, challenging'. As Crul et al. (2017b: 323) write, discrimination and racism are common experiences for individual with immigrant background in top positions; however, they try to overcome these obstacles 'and showing that they are capable and will succeed, even if others want to

see them fail and they have to make twice as much effort to receive the same level of recognition'.

This paper contributes to the field by providing new insights into the pathways to advanced positions by a group of stigmatised immigrants with an Iranian background in Sweden.

## THE IRANIAN DIASPORA IN SWEDEN

The number of immigrants from Iran changed radically following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, growing from 3,348 to 40,000 by 1990. After the implementation of a ceasefire between Iran and Iraq in 1988 and the introduction of Sweden's 1990 restricted migration policy, there was a considerable decrease in the number of Iranian immigrants to Sweden. In recent years, we have witnessed a new group of Iranians who have migrated to Sweden to study for a Master's degree or a PhD at Swedish universities.

By 2012, there were 65,000 individuals born in Iran and 20,000 with two parents born in Iran. According to Statistics Sweden (SCB 2019a), this group was the ninth largest of those with a migrant background in Sweden in 2018 — 116,000 individuals with a background in Iran (77,000 'first generation', 18,000 'second generation' and 21,000 children of mixed marriages).

Those Iranians who migrated to Sweden between 1981 and 1990 were primarily members of oppositional political parties as well as ethnic and religious minorities. The next largest category — which Kelly (2013) labels 'socio-cultural emigrants' — was those who eventually fled the increasingly dominant religious culture of everyday life in Iran and the troubles caused by the Iran–Iraq war, among whom many young men who had fled military service and the war. Recent flows of Iranian migration have consisted of students and professionals with upper-middle-class backgrounds who came to Sweden after 2007. Endowed with a highly valued and transnationally usable cultural capital (indicated by their higher education and English-language proficiency), they have been successful in obtaining professional employment in Sweden. Consequently, the Iranian diaspora is highly differentiated in terms of class, ethnicity, and religious and political affiliation (for a review of previous studies on the Iranian diaspora in Sweden, see Kelly 2017; Khosravi 2018).

As shown in ***Table 1***, among those adults (25–64 years old) in Sweden who were born in Iran, about 53% have post-secondary or tertiary education, which is a significantly higher rate than that of university-educated people in the total population of Sweden (SCB 2019b).

**Table 1** Educational level of individuals (25–64 years old) born in Iran compared to those born in and outside Sweden (%).

*Source*: SCB (2019b) Educational attainment of the population.

| EDUCATION | PRIMARY | UPPER-SECONDARY | TERTIARY < 3 YEARS | TERTIARY > 3 YEARS | MISSING DATA |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Born in Sweden | 9 | 47 | 16 | 28 | 0 |
| All foreign-born | 20 | 35 | 16 | 29 | 8 |
| Born in Iran | 10 | 37 | 17 | 36 | 2 |

Even though the Iranians who left their country were part of the well-educated and secular 'middle class', not all were able to regain their previous status once in Sweden. As Bevelander and Lundh (2007) emphasise, in spite of their higher educational credentials compared to men born in Sweden, those born in Iran have higher odds of finding a job that demands primary and upper-secondary educational qualifications and lower odds of being employed in jobs that demand a tertiary education.

## THE POSITION OF IMMIGRANTS FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH

The empirical bases for this article are firstly, Swedish register data and, secondly, in-depth interviews with individuals who have made prominent careers in economics, politics and academia. To study those with *high incomes*, we used register data from Statistics Sweden's LISA database 2012 and selected those who had the highest 2% annual income (150,675 individuals). To explore the position of those with a migration background in Swedish *universities*, we also used register data from the 2012 LISA database. We included in our analysis all individuals who had a PhD (from Sweden or abroad) and were currently employed in a Swedish university (15,953 individuals). In order to investigate the *political field* and the representation of individuals with a migration background, we used data from Statistics Sweden's register of candidates who were selected in municipal, county and national parliamentary elections in 2014 (13,855 individuals).

As shown in ***Table 2***, individuals with an immigrant background from the global South (Africa, Asia and Latin America) are under-represented in the high-ranking positions of the three fields (political, academic and economic) under study. The percentage of those with a global South background among the 'top 2% rich group' and political representatives is less than a third of their share of the total population although it is higher among academics.

**Table 2** Percentage of high-ranking positions, Swedish and immigrant background.

*Sources*: Statistics Sweden's register of elected, RTB and STATIV (2014) and Statistics Sweden's LISA database (2012).

[1]Born in Sweden with at least one Swedish-born parent (other groups consist of foreign-born (first generation) or Sweden-born with two foreign-born parents (second generation) from each region).

| | % TOTAL POP'N | POLITICS | | HIGH INCOME | | ACADEMICS | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | % | NO. | % | NO. | % | NO. | % |
| Sweden[1] | **76.1** | 12,546 | **90.3** | 135,122 | **89.7** | 12,572 | **80.4** |
| Nordic countries | **3.7** | 417 | **3.0** | 11,948 | **3.2** | 539 | **3.4** |
| W. Europe + N. America | **2.4** | 149 | **1.1** | 3,087 | **2.1** | 861 | **5.6** |
| Other European | **5.7** | 277 | **2.0** | 3,364 | **2.2** | 657 | **4.3** |
| Asian | **8.6** | 359 | **2.6** | 3,161 | **2.0** | 691 | **4.4** |
| Africa | **2.3** | 76 | **0.6** | 392 | **0.3** | 141 | **0.9** |
| South America | **1.2** | 64 | **0.4** | 601 | **0.4** | 155 | **1.0** |
| Total | | 13,888 | | 150,675 | | 15,616 | |

What our quantitative results reveal, (***Table 2***) about the significant under-representation of individuals from the global South in these top positions, are as follows (see Behtoui 2018 and 2019 for more details). Those with a native background have *historically* been in positions of power (transition of wealth across generations) and so have access to considerably more resources than do individuals with an immigrant

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background. To give one example, the results in ***Table A1*** (in the Appendix) show that having the private sector as a source of income, being the offspring of parents with a high educational and employment status and having siblings in high-income groups are all significantly and positively associated with the outcomes. More than all other variables (as shown by the Beta coefficient in this table), having investment income (inherited accumulated capital) is a main factor in the possession of a greater income among those in the group of the 'highest 2% annual income'.

Even if those from minority groups have the same formal qualifications as those needed to be in the top positions in each field, they would not be able to occupy the same posts as their counterparts with a native background. The salaries shown in ***Table A2*** in the Appendix are an indicator of the correct position of each individual within the organisational hierarchy of universities. Even after including all meritocratic control variables, there are still considerable differences between the incomes of academics born in Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America on the one hand and the reference group on the other (between 20% and 30% less for the former). In other words, given the same qualifications and skills, individuals from the global South are in lower positions.

## INDIVIDUALS WITH AN IRANIAN BACKGROUND IN HIGH-RANKING POSITIONS

A more detailed examination of the same data (describe above) on the rate of representation of individuals with an immigrant background in the above-mentioned fields (see ***Table 3***) shows that, after individuals with a native background (born in Sweden with at least one Swedish-born parent), those who were born in or who had (two) parents from Finland (belonging to the global North) and Iran (belonging to the global South) had the highest number of representatives in the 'top 2% rich group' and in the political field.

**Table 3** Percentage of those with a Finnish or Iranian background in the high-ranking positions.

Sources: Statistics Sweden's register of elected, RTB and STATIV (2014) and Statistics Sweden's LISA database (2012).

| | RATE IN TOTAL POPULATION | POLITICS | | HIGH INCOME | | ACADEMICS | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | % | NO. | % | NO. | % | NO. | % |
| Sweden | **76.1** | 12,546 | **90.3** | 135,122 | **89.7** | 12,572 | **80.4** |
| **Finland** | **2.6** | 167 | **1.5** | 2,315 | **1.6** | 96 | **0.8** |
| **Iran** | **0.6** | 69 | **0.5** | 1,010 | **0.6** | 168 | **1.4** |

It is not surprising that individuals with a Finnish background (among all other immigrants belonging to countries in the global North) are so strongly placed among the high-ranking positions. Finland and Sweden, as two Nordic countries, have a long and common history — majority of immigrants from Finland have a good knowledge of the Swedish language and they are the largest group of people with a migrant background in Sweden. Nonetheless, the figures in ***Table 3*** reveal that, even if individuals with a Finnish background are numerically the largest of the minority groups, their number in the high-ranked positions in the three fields of economics, politics and academia in Swedish society is lower than that in the general population.

However, this is not the case for those with an Iranian background (belonging to the group from the global South). Their proportion among the high ranking in these three fields is roughly equal to that among the population as a whole. Note that immigrants

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from Iran have usually lived a significantly shorter time in Sweden and have had no previous knowledge of the Swedish language or contact with the country. Furthermore, although there is a high degree of social acceptability of immigrants from Nordic countries (including Finland) in Sweden, there is a more exclusionary attitude towards immigrants from 'Middle Eastern' countries, including Iran (see the following).

## 1. THE HYPER-SELECTIVITY EXPLANATION

The (hyper-)selectivity of immigrants with an Iranian background regarding their access to educational, cultural and political capital is a major explanation when it comes to their career success after migration. Post-revolution immigrants from Iran, as shown in ***Table 1***, were highly educated.

For middle-class Iranians who left their country after the 1979 revolution, education was the main means to achieving high levels of social and economic mobility. This emphasis on higher education as the social vehicle for advancement — an inheritance from the 1960s — continued to grow throughout the migration years in Sweden. One of the most prominent facets of this 'cultural frame' (Goffman 1986), according to a Iranian middle-class popular belief, is the following firm definition of 'success': one should earn an advanced degree from a university and obtain a professional job in medicine, engineering, science, law or economics (cf. Kelly 2013). Attributing educational attainment to social mobility, Iranian immigrants also encouraged their children to obtain high levels of education in Sweden. Children grew up with certain expectations of what their educational trajectory would look like. Parents were firmly determined to ensure that the educational goals they had set were achieved.

Furthermore, those Iranians who migrated not only belonged to the educated classes of Iranian society but were also largely *secular* with a *Westernised* lifestyle and *urban* culture. Therefore, they viewed themselves as sharing similar mindsets to Swedes in this respect. As noted by Graham and Khosravi (1997: 117) 'Iranians are clearly similar to Swedes in terms of such things as education, previous occupation, and degree of travel abroad.'

In addition to the quantitative data set out earlier, a total of 50 in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 academics, 20 businesspeople and 10 politicians.[1] All interviewees had high-ranking positions in the Swedish academic, political or business sectors. They were born in Iran, although the majority of the entrepreneurs (65%) and politicians (80%) had been under 18 years of age at the time of their arrival in Sweden. All of them had a university degree and had received all or part of their education in Sweden. The length of residence of our informants was more than 30 years at the time of interview (see ***Table 4***). They were identified through media reporting about 'successful' individuals with immigrant backgrounds or through our own networks as researchers within academia. Through a classic snowball effect, the individuals approached by the researchers would refer to other individuals with a similar career and background.

1 The project was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority. As specified by the general standards for ethical research, all participants were informed about the purpose of the project prior to taking part. In all disseminations of the findings, the names of participants are changed or omitted.

| | GENDER (MEN %) | AGE (MEAN) | EDUCATION (PHD) % | LENGTH OF RESIDENCE (30 + YEARS) % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Academics (20) | 45 | 51 | 100 | 90 |
| Entrepreneurs (20) | 70 | 43 | 10 | 100 |
| Politicians (10) | 40 | 36 | 0 | 100 |

**Table 4** Characteristics of the interviewees.

The hyper-selectivity of this group is stated by our interviewees as the natural reason for their presence among the Swedish academic elite. As a male professor of engineering tells us:

> During the late 1980s and early 1990s, more than 30 per cent of my fellow students came from Iran and many of us continued studying after our engineering degree. It was because, with a Master's degree in engineering, you can earn a significantly higher salary on the regular labour market than staying in academe. Therefore, studying for a PhD was not an attractive option for Swedish students but, for us, a doctorate was proof that we are capable of achieving the highest academic status.

The reason, as previous research showed, is that with an engineering degree, one can earn a significantly higher salary on the regular labour market than someone who stays in academe and goes on to study for a PhD; furthermore, the probability of landing a permanent job with favourable promotion opportunities is also higher. These factors open up possibilities for the foreign-born to apply for PhD positions in these disciplines (Behtoui & Leivestad 2019).

Our quantitative data on Iranian individuals in the 'high-income earner' bracket show that they were significantly more educated than their native Swedish counterparts. If about 65% of natives among these upper-income-bracket groups had a longer university education, the corresponding figure for those with an Iranian background was 88%. Furthermore, several of our interviewees described a socialisation process during their adolescence that encouraged higher education even for entrepreneurial activities:

'My father was a bank manager', declared an IT company manager and the young owner of a recruitment agency said:

My grandfather was one of the first people after the Second World War to start importing Mercedes Benz to Iran. He was an academic businessman, because he was also a newspaper publisher and my father assisted him with his business.

Some interviewees reported that they gained entrepreneurial skills and training in and through higher education by studying business economics at Swedish universities. In this way, they were able to enter into the business world. They maintain that the study of economics was regarded by their parents as a prestige education, as confirmed by Paris a young female entrepreneur:

> I was a 'rebel' and told my parents that I was not going to study medicine. But studying at the Stockholm School of Economics was also OK for them; they knew that only 300 students were able to enter this leading business school. I started my company during the last semester when we had to present our business idea.

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Arash (38 years, recruitment agency owner) told us 'Already during my studies in economics, I started a company to recruit other students to sell funds and fund advisory services', whereas Peyman (32 years, owner of a health centre) stated:

> I studied medicine, but my passion was actually economics. Thus, I studied economics in parallel, while I had a small firm during my studies as well. After finishing my medical and economic programmes, I bought this health centre, together with my older sister, who is also a physician.

Regarding the field of politics, the higher educational and 'political capital' of those with an Iranian background was one of the sources of their comparative advantage at a time when representatives with an immigrant background were in demand and considered to be more suitable to represent the interests arising from migration-related experiences (see Behtoui 2018). They were able to provide an appropriate supply of resourceful candidates. Among our interviewees in this field, all were from families with a political and intellectual tradition.

Moreover, the majority of first-generation Iranian immigrants did not perceive their life in Sweden to be a *temporary* break but were trying 'to rebuild a new life in the host country' (Graham & Khosravi 1997: 118). This was the case, in particular, for political refugees after the 1979 revolution who were members and activists of political oppositional parties before their move. As return was not on the agenda, their access to resources made it possible for them (within a short time after arrival) to leave the segregated and deprived neighbourhoods of first settlement (where most of the newcomer and marginalised migrants reside). For children who have grown up in such a family environment, the political commitment has been quite obvious, as our informants stated in their interviews. As one female MP tells us: 'My father was political prisoner in Iran both during the Pahlavi dynasty and after the 1979 revolution'. Another young male MP from a left-wing party described the environment he grew up in: 'I grew up in a family where politics and political discussions were always present'. One of the (first-generation) Iranian immigrants, a Member of Parliament from the Left Party, says: 'I was a member of a guerrilla organisation before migrating to Sweden.' A young woman who was elected as a Member of Parliament for the Social Democratic Party during the recent national elections maintains: 'Both my mother and my father – and actually almost all in our family – were involved in political activities in Iran in one way or another.'

## 2. RESOURCES IN THE MIGRANT COMMUNITY AS A SOURCE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

The varying characteristics of and resources in the migrants' community organisations in their new country of residence determine the level of social capital available to immigrant families (Portes & Rumbaut 2001). Immigrant groups with abundant economic and cultural resources are usually more successful in establishing such organisations. In the presence of the latter, migrant families are able to utilise a network of kin, friends and compatriots who support them, providing information and other assistance.

According to Hosseini-Kaladjahi and Kelly (2012), there are around 125 or 130 Iranian social, cultural and political associations in Sweden. These associations flourished nearly a decade after the arrival of the first groups of Iranian immigrants. Among the activities offered are the teaching of the Persian language, the celebration of Iranian national festivals and the organisation of cultural activities (Emami 2012). As Kelly

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(2012) reminds us, the members of the Iranian community are highly differentiated in terms of both ethnicity (e.g. Kurds), religion (e.g. Armenian Christians and Bahai's) and political affiliation (e.g. leftist, Mujahedin and Monarchists). However, homogeneity and like-mindedness intensified the solidarity among each specific group's members in each of these sub-groups.

As Schrover and Vermeulen (2005) denote, few immigrant organisations survive beyond the 'first generation', mostly because the common interests that kept them together originally are becoming weaker among the new generation — this was the case for those of the first generation of the above-mentioned associations. Khosravi's (2018) report of the celebration of *Chahrshanbeh Souri* (the ancient celebration of the last Wednesday of the Iranian year) is a good example. Since the late 1980s, this event in Stockholm has been organised by the National Federation of Iranians (a first-generation association) in a modest way in a suburb of the city. In recent years, the same ceremony has been organised by other actors (mainly the 'second generation') with the assistance of mainstream organisations like *Riksteatern* (the Swedish National Theatre) and generous governmental funding, in central areas of the city and broadcast live on the Swedish public-sector TV channel. Among other active voluntary Swedish-Iranian associations that have been initiated by the Iranian 'second generation', we can mention the 'Iranian-Swedish Entrepreneurship Network', founded in 2013 with the goal of gathering together Iranian-Swedish entrepreneurs in order to exchange knowledge and form relationships. Another example is the 'Yari Foundation', whose mission is to enable socially and economically marginalised children in Iran to complete their education.

One essential source for creating the social capital specific to the business field has networks and cooperation with fellow countrymen, according to our respondents. 'I met my current business partner [another young "second-generation" Iranian] when we studied at KTH in Stockholm; we both were smartphone nerds,' the founder of a technology and computer company tells us, adding 'I know many other Iranians who are successful businessmen and I have good contacts with most of them through the Iranian-Swedish Entrepreneurship Network.' Such networks provide opportunities for exchanging knowledge and establishing business relationships. Many of the owners of these companies are sponsors of the Yari Foundation.

An owner of successful computer company, (a man in his early 30s), reports how, together with an Iranian friend from university, they started:

> We met each other, after our regular job, every afternoon at six and continued until midnight when the last subway left, five days a week. An idea of a webpage grew, but the step of getting investors interested was dificult; we made a business plan and at last we found an investor.

Transnational networks are also important sources of social capital for Iranian migrants and their children in Sweden. Different types of social tie link them with other Iranians in Iran and other Iranian diasporas (Behtoui 2021). One example is the relationship between those already holding senior positions in Swedish universities and who are willing to recruit PhD candidates directly from Iran or among young Iranians who have migrated to Sweden in recent years to study for a Master's at Swedish universities. There were plenty of highly qualified young people among them who were ready to take up PhD positions with fewer demands, hard work and a lower salary (compared to young native-born students). As one of our informants (a professor and co-responsible for the admittance of PhDs and post-docs), told us:

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> When the most recent PhD position was advertised, 70–80 per cent of the applicants were qualified students from Iran. I know the quality of higher education at different universities there, therefore, I can choose the best ones.

## 3. THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

Thus far, access to more resources (educational, political and social capital) was described as the factors of more likelihood to succeed. Moreover, the socio-historical contexts into which migrants and their children arrive and settle in should be considered. The individual resources of immigrants interact with (and will be affected by) the contextual factors. More or less favourable contextual conditions can generate different outcomes. Successful outcomes are thus also a matter of being in the right place at the right time. Three concrete circumstances in the case of individuals with an Iranian background in Sweden are as follows.

First, some features of the Swedish society during the 1980s and 1990s, when Iranian immigrated to Sweden, have been crucial for these immigrants to be able to renew, recreate and reproduce the resources that they bring with themselves in the new country of residence and have expanded their opportunity horizons. At that time, Sweden as a democratic welfare state treated immigrants generously and give them 'the opportunity to have free education, financial security, universal healthcare and even quick and easy naturalization' (Kelly 2013: 16). Swedish family policy, as well, at that time facilitated a balance between childrearing and labour market participation of immigrants.

Second, the political capital (their interests and experiences) of Iranian refugees was activated and utilised when there was an increasing demand for candidates with an immigrant background on the political market. As Dancygier et al. (2015), for example, show, the share of immigrants among elected councillors at the municipal level increased from 4.2% in 1991 to 7.6% in 2010. Iranian immigrants and their descendants were able to provide an appropriate supply of resourceful candidates in this period.

Third, for those active in the economic field, the deregulation and privatisation of Swedish welfare services (such as public healthcare and schools), which started as of the 1990s, has been decisive and has opened up new potential money-making markets. Those who succeeded in these new markets had the appropriate education and work experience within the healthcare or education sectors, together with the knowledge and the skills needed to run a private enterprise in these sectors, all of which they brought with them from Iran. Note that privatisation happened while the majority of natives who worked in these sectors did not have such skills. Thus, the appropriate educational credentials and the experience of working in private healthcare and education in Iran, plus the right timing, were key factors in the success of immigrants with an Iranian background in this part of the market ('being the right man (or woman), in the right place, at the right time').

One of our interviewees — the 52-year-old female owner of a large private healthcare company) — tells us that, by taking inspiration from healthcare systems in Iran, she saw a new trend emerging — the privatisation of public health in Sweden — which she saw as 'a promising prospect', adding 'I soon launched the idea of offering private services in primary healthcare'. As a small start-up company, she won several competitive biddings. Through doing this, she 'started a war on the market'.

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The owner of a private clinic (a 55-year-old male physician) told us about the managerial skills he already had in Iran: 'I had several employees who assisted me when I was responsible for quality assurance in many clinics in Iran'. Another respondent (a 50-year-old female) who runs now 16 private childcare services with her partner described her extensive experience in this sector in Iran. Another physician (male, 48 years) who now leads a private clinic mentioned his experience of and skills as the joint owner of a private hospital in Iran.

Another example of 'being in the right place at the right time' was someone starting a business at the height of the IT boom in the 1990s in Sweden. Several of our interviewees had started their business in this sector — a new arena for newcomers in the economic field. Some of this business development was a matter of finding a new niche in the market, a place that was not yet occupied by an already established Swedish company, a place in which newcomers could build successful enterprises in as-yet-unexploited markets (cf. Laird 2006) — in brief, to conquer sectors of the market which were not already occupied. As the successful owner of a computer company, a male refugee from Iran who moved to Stockholm in the 1980s, talks of his several attempts to import various products without great success 'but in the 1990s IT became…well, a boom! Well, yes, there were a number of good opportunities'. He thus began importing computer items from Asian countries.

To sum up, the individual resources of Iranian immigrants plus resources in their community organisations/networks partly explain their successful outcomes. The socio-historical contexts into which these individuals arrived and settled also had an impact on their achievements.

## HOW INDIVIDUALS WITH AN IRANIAN BACKGROUND ARE VIEWED BY THE MAJORITY POPULATION

Ghassan Hage (2003) refers to a 'return to class' as the principle for belonging to 'us civilised' in the countries of the global North of today. Through the social mobility of some immigrant groups from the global South (e.g. Asian migrants in Australia), who have become members of the middle and upper classes in the global North, Hage (2003: 155) argues that we are witnessing

> the cultural pluralism among the middle classes and the upper classes which has meant that race as a principle for the distribution of the 'hope to be civilized' is no longer as functional to capitalism as it used to be.

Blacks, Asians and other phenotypical third-world nationals belonging to the middle and the upper classes, according to this argument, are now granted the possibility of being one of 'us'. They are the polar opposites of the working-class people in these countries (with different backgrounds, including whites) who are now being increasingly denied the ability to belong to this 'new multicultural civilisation' (Hage 2003: 155).

As the results of this study show, some immigrants from Iran have managed to access high-ranking positions in Sweden. Nonetheless, the question remains as to whether Iranian immigrants and their descendants, belonging to a 'successful' group, are recognised by the majority population as one of 'them'. All previous Swedish studies contradict such a hypothesis.

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In one of the earliest surveys, Lange and Westin (1997) asked a representative sample of 1,800 native-born Swedish respondents for their opinion concerning different groups of immigrants. As their results showed, the least popular groups were, in turn, Iranians, Turks and Ethiopians; the most popular were Brits and Finns. In a further series of surveys conducted at Uppsala University and having the same subject and focus (see Mella et al. 2013; Mella et al. 2011), immigrants from Iran (together with Somalis and the Roma) were among those at the bottom of the hierarchy as far as popularity was concerned. Individuals among the majority population considered themselves to be far removed from these immigrants. In Jonsson et al.'s (2013: 50–54) survey of 4,000 young people aged 15, respondents were presented with 12 groups of immigrants and asked to report their opinion of them. The respondents were more in favour of immigrants from the global North (the USA, Finland, Germany, etc.). At the same time, they spoke of their strongly negative attitude towards Iranians, Turks, Somalis and the Roma. As Kelly (2013: 174) wrote: 'Despite their positive self-image, the majority of diasporic Iranians I spoke with nevertheless felt that Iranians were not viewed positively by Swedish society.' Our data also confirm the findings of these studies.

Several academics recounted in their interviews how they had been excluded from networks of those who write research proposals and did not received support from their supervisors after graduation. One female researcher in medicine said:

> Powerful people in academia look for someone who is similar to themselves, both in terms of interest and lots of other things, and we don't fulfil their requirements in many respects.

Another researcher said: 'For one professorship they ranked an immigrant Number One and then me. But they withdrew the position without any explanation.'

As one of our informants, the CEO of a medium-sized electronics company, told us:

> In the office we are sitting in now, someone else used to sit. And when I was still studying at the university and needed an internship (…) the person who sat behind this desk told me that I wasn't sufficiently Swedish to work at the company. So, I told him that one day I'll take his office and sit there. And that's where I'm sitting today!

A former female MP with Iranian parents who was removed from her assignment, after 15 years of political commitments, once a new party leader was elected, stated: 'How you are treated is so subtle that it is very hard to grasp … you are not really there on your own terms but because of where you come from'. In-group favouritism – or 'bias for' the normative *in-group* — unfairness, inhospitability, even hostility and 'bias against' those who are perceived as the *outgroup*, have all contributed to the disadvantaged position of many politicians from this group, according to her. A male politician with Iranian background tells us:

> Discussing the residents of a neighbourhood in our city, a Swedish city-council member told me that all of them are Swedish, except some newly rich Iranians. I did not know how I should take his humbling comment.

To sum up, despite these 'successful' outcomes, people in this group — even those in high-ranking positions — are, as non-European immigrants, still vulnerable to racism and discrimination. Their 'success' did not guarantee their acceptance. Such acceptance has more to do with the beliefs of the majority population than with the actual situation of the group in question. These 'successes' have not changed the

status of the group as a whole, whose members continue to be perceived as *others* (cf. Zhou 2004). This was the fate of Jewish immigrants in Europe in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, of individuals in the Chinese communities in Indonesia and Malaysia and of Ugandan Asians in the early 1970s. The successful incorporation of these minority groups and their class position did not guarantee that the majority population would see them as becoming a part of 'us'.

## IN CONCLUSION

As the results of this study show, immigrants with an Iranian background arrived in Sweden with specific resources that facilitated their social mobility in the new country of residence. They obtain high-ranking positions in the political, academic and business fields in Sweden, according to the results presented in this study. However, these achievements were neither because of some extraordinary characteristics of this group nor because of a unique national 'culture value' that makes them different from other groups of immigrants. Rather, these outcomes emerged from the resources (the cultural and social capital) that people in this group brought with them, in interaction with the favourable context in the new country of residence. These achievements have been gained, however, despite the discriminatory practices that are encountered by immigrants from global South, including those with an Iranian background.

Furthermore, individuals in this group are not accepted yet and perceived as being a part of 'us'. Their high-ranking socio-economic outcomes have not yet altered group-based perceptions of them as a stigmatised immigrant group from the global South. More research is needed to find out how individuals in this group perceive themselves and identify themselves (e.g. as the exceptions to and distinct from other immigrants from global South) and whether the change in the position of this group can, in the future, alter the majority population's perceptions about them.

At the same time, we should not forget any within-group variations among individuals in this group. Focusing on the 'successful' category should not make the other members of the group invisible — those who, according to Khosravi (2018: 74), 'are regarded as "failed migrants" and have often been invisibilised in studies of the Iranian diaspora'. Nor should we forget the cost of this 'success story' for those individuals who do not fit in this narrow definition of success. It might induce a feeling of 'failure', of being 'inadequate' and 'not good enough' (particularly among young people in this group), which, in turn, would cause a lack of confidence and a low sense of self-worth.

Finally, as Puwar (2004: 32) reminds us, the very presence of racialised minorities among those with top positions challenges long-standing boundaries. Their existence in positions of authority (which historically had been reserved for specific types of bodies) highlights 'how certain types of masculinity and whiteness have marked what are often represented as empty, neutral positions that can be filled by any(body)'. Hence, our analysis should go beyond the quantities of different bodies in the upper layers of the social hierarchy. The presence of some individuals with a migrant background in high-ranking positions and sites of authority 'should not be taken as a straightforward sign that organizational cultures and structures are drastically changing' (Puwar 2004: 32).

# APPENDIX

| *SECTOR (REF: PUBLIC SECTOR)* | B | BETA |
|---|---|---|
| Private | **.174 **** | .178 |
| Other | **.107 **** | .089 |
| Education parents | **.005 **** | .023 |
| Job status parents | **.003 **** | .026 |
| Siblings among high-income earners | **.053 **** | .047 |
| Sum of capital gain | **1.087E-005 **** | .376 |
| **$R^2$ adj.** | **.209** | |

**Table A1** Determinants of being in a high-income group, OLS regression, partial (and standardised) coefficients.[1]

*Notes*: [1] Results are controlled for individuals' age, gender, education, migration background, age at migration and citizenship (when applicable); ** denotes significance at 1%, * at 5%.

| | BETA | |
|---|---|---|
| Age | **.01 **** | **.105** |
| Years after PhD | **.02 **** | .185 |
| Gender (male) | **.08 **** | .038 |
| *Immigrant background (ref: Sweden)* | | |
| Nordic countries | .010 | .001 |
| Western Europe/North America | –.073 | –.012 |
| **Eastern Europe** | **–.22 **** | –.037 |
| **Asia** | **–.26 **** | –.030 |
| **Iran** | **–.20 **** | –.019 |
| **China** | **–.17 *** | –.018 |
| **South America** | **–.22 **** | –.019 |
| **Africa** | **–.30 **** | –.024 |
| North_2 | –.078 | –.008 |
| West_2 | –.168 | –.008 |
| East_2 | –.022 | –.002 |
| PhD in Sweden | .04 | .008 |
| Citizen | **.16 **** | .036 |
| More than 10 years in Sweden | **.13 **** | .031 |
| **R2 Adj.** | **.096** | |

**Table A2** Determinants of academics' salary (LN early work income), OLS regression, unstandardised (and standardised) coefficients, N = 15,020.

*Note:* ** denotes significance at 1%, * at 5%.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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