

## Warnings in Iran of an "Emigration Tsunami"

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**Experts, political activists, and Iranian media have recently warned of increased Iranian emigration. While emigration is not new, the renewed discussion of the phenomenon and its ramifications provides further evidence of the growing sense of despair among the Iranian public, especially the younger generation. Factors contributing to this sentiment in recent years include the collapse of the nuclear deal, the renewal of the sanctions, the heightened economic crisis, and the disappointment at President Rouhani's failure to fulfill his promises of economic improvement and the expansion of civil liberties. The COVID-19 crisis and the conservative takeover of the political institutions, particularly the election of President Raisi, have deepened the lack of hope and the fear of increased political and civil repression. The sense of frustration could provide fertile ground for renewed popular protest in the future. However, at the same time, it is possible that the increased desire to emigrate signals a search for other ways to cope with the despair that do not encourage political change and could even delay it, including political apathy and severe social phenomena such as suicide and drug addiction.**

Warnings have sounded in Iran recently about increased emigration. In early July 2021, Bahram Salavati, the director of the Iran Migration Observatory, presented figures indicating a rise in the number of citizens who expressed an intention to emigrate. The director of the information center, which operates within the framework of Sharif University of Technology in Tehran, said in an interview for the newspaper *Hamshahri* that since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a decline in the number of Iranian emigrants for the purposes of studies or work, due to COVID-19 restrictions and the closing of borders. At the same time, there has been a rise in the number of Iranian asylum seekers, who illegally and unofficially leave via Turkey for European countries and request refugee status. According to the center's data, the number of Iranian emigrants who left for Turkey (the majority of them on the way to Europe) increased from 15,500 in 2016 to 42,000 in 2019. According to

data from the Nilgam Center, which provides services to Iranian citizens seeking to emigrate, from 2010 to 2020 there were about 500,000 new Iranian emigrants. Furthermore, studies conducted recently by the Migration Observatory indicate an increasing number of citizens who do not just express a general desire to leave Iran but report their decision to fulfill their desire. Salavati warned that this trend could find expression in a significant wave of emigration once the COVID-19 restrictions are lifted.

In recent years there has been a heated public debate in Iran surrounding emigration, especially the "brain drain" crisis, which is seen as a significant challenge with serious consequences for the Iranian economy. The intensifying economic difficulties, and especially the unemployment crisis, combined with trends of modernization, restrictions on personal freedoms, and political and social instability limit opportunities for self-development and prosperity for many educated and skilled young people, and are considered central factors encouraging emigration. The high rate of population growth in the 1980s and the recession led to increasing gaps in the Iranian economy's ability to accommodate the number of young people entering the job market each year. According to data from the Statistical Centre of Iran, in 2019-2020 the unemployment rate reached 26 percent among young people ages 15-24 and 17.9 percent among young people ages 18-35. Unemployment among young people mainly affects educated young people, because the growth rate of institutions of higher learning does not match the needs of the economy and the government's ability to produce new workplaces. In May 2020 Minister of Labor and Social Services Ali Rabii provided an update stating that 40 percent of university graduates in Iran were unemployed, and warned that this rate was expected to increase further.

In 2014 the Minister of Science and Technology, Reza Faraji-Dana, announced that about 150,000 Iranian experts were emigrating each year and said that the fact that many of the students going abroad to study were not returning given the lack of satisfactory conditions caused significant economic losses to Iran. Even if the number of Iranian emigrants was inflated by the minister, there is no doubt regarding the

severity of the phenomenon and its consequences. According to figures published in early 2021 by the Supreme Council of Iranian Affairs, more than four million Iranians live outside Iran: 47 percent emigrated to America (the vast majority to the United States and Canada), 29 percent to Europe (mainly the UK, Germany, Sweden, and France), 14 percent to Arab countries and Africa (the majority of them to the United Arab Emirates and Iraq), and 10 percent to Asia and Oceania (mainly Turkey, Australia, and Malaysia). While this is not a new phenomenon, it appears that it is increasing and expanding to additional social sectors. In September 2021, the Nilgam Center pointed out that in the past few years emigration has expanded to all social strata and is no longer limited to those with financial means or to professionals.

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 crisis, senior officials in the Iranian health system warned of an increase in the wave of emigration among doctors and nurses as well. In August 2021, the chair of the Iranian Medical Council, Mohammad-Reza Zafarghandi, said in an interview to the reformist daily newspaper *Shargh* that in the past year there had been a significant rise in the number of doctors seeking to emigrate for employment, economic, and social reasons. He noted that in the past year alone the Council had received over 3,000 requests from doctors to emigrate. In addition, a member of the Supreme Council of the Iranian Nursing Organization, Yousef Rahimi, stated that the number of requests for emigration received by the Council grew from 200-300 a year to 1,500. The following month, Dr. Ali Jafarian, a surgeon and lecturer at the Tehran University of Medical Sciences, warned that the desire to emigrate had become a "tsunami" encompassing both young students and professors at universities. He wrote in his Twitter account that the authorities must wake up, recognize the reasons for the situation, and work to rectify it before it's too late.

Political activists and the media also took part in warning about the rise in emigration. In late July 2021, journalist and reformist activist Abbas Abdi published a public letter to incoming President Ebrahim Raisi, in which he warned against a proposed law discussed in recent months in the Iranian

parliament (Majles) that aims to tighten the restrictions imposed on the use of social media. Abdi claimed that imposing additional limitations could not only bring about a renewal of popular protest, but also increase emigration due to the loss of hope and public confidence in the authorities. To strengthen his claim, Abdi related to figures indicating that after the initial vote in the Majles on the proposed law, there was a rise in hundreds of percent in the number of Google searches by Iranians related to emigration. In his view, the emigration of citizens, especially entrepreneurs, doctors, and creative young people endangers Iran even more than protests in the streets because it entails the loss of great human and financial capital.

The website Asr-e Iran also related to the increase in emigration. An op-ed published on September 7 stated that many of those who decide to emigrate love their country and are not interested in leaving their families, but are forced to do so in looking for a calmer and better life. Emigration has become a serious concern among many citizens, especially those born in the 1980s and 1990s who have lost all hope for the future. These young people invested much time and effort in studies in the hope of achieving a respectable social standing and relative comfort. They did not intend to emigrate but rather to serve their homeland, but at the end of their studies they found themselves employed by government ministries with low pay and receiving degrading treatment from their managers. In this harsh reality, even their families, who in the past opposed the emigration of their children and tried to convince them not to leave, are now willing to sell their property in order to buy them a flight ticket.

The heightened debate on emigration provides further evidence of the intensifying sense of despair among the Iranian public, especially the younger generation. The election of President Hassan Rouhani in 2013 aroused hope for change in light of his promises to improve the economic situation and expand civil liberties. Expectations of an improvement in the situation strengthened following the nuclear deal in the summer of 2015. But the United States withdrawal from the nuclear deal in May 2018, the renewal of the sanctions against Iran, the worsened economic crisis, and

the disappointment at President Rouhani's failure to fulfill his promises to the public led to a growing sense of anguish. The despair and disappointment intensified further following the COVID-19 crisis and the conservative takeover of the political institutions in the parliamentary elections in February 2020 and in the presidential elections in June 2021, which seated the hardline cleric Ebrahim Raisi as President and increased concerns of worsening political and civil repression under the new government.

The intensity of the despair was highly evident in the waves of protest in Iran since the end of 2017 and in the especially low voter turnout in both the parliamentary and presidential elections. The sense of frustration could provide fertile ground for renewed popular protest in the future. However, the apparent increase in the desire to emigrate from Iran could indicate that public despair and loss of hope in the ability to make significant change are not necessarily leading to increased protest but rather to other ways of coping with the reality, including emigration, political apathy, an increasing tendency toward escapism, and severe social phenomena such as suicide and drug addiction. These phenomena could actually delay political changes, at least in the short term, especially given the strength of the regime, its ability to suppress potential threats to its stability, and the weakness of the protest movement, which at present has not succeeded in creating cracks in the regime's mechanisms of repression and generating significant change.

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