



Iranian Refugees

An exploration of irregular migration to Australia

April 2015

A working paper based on research into irregular maritime arrivals to Australia and interviews with people in Iran preparing to migrate irregularly.

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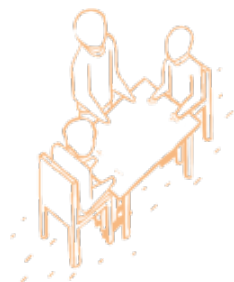
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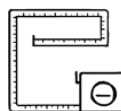


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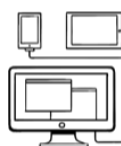
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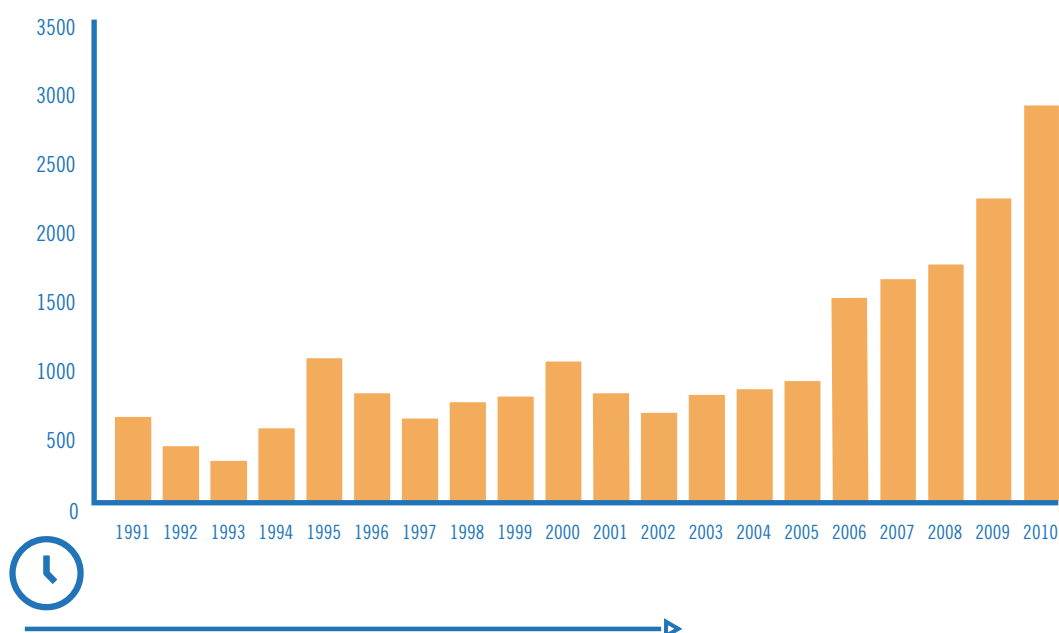
BACKGROUND

In the last five years, a little-noticed change in the composition of irregular maritime arrivals (IMAs) to Australia has involved the rise of Iranians. They have driven an expansion of the Iranian diaspora in Australia, which inspired Farsight to interview 199 people in Iran preparing to emigrate. A central question is whether enthusiasm for Australia continues despite major changes to how Australia deals with IMAs. This working paper provides an initial set of findings.

THE IRANIAN DIASPORA IN AUSTRALIA

Following the 1979 revolution in Iran, Australia established a humanitarian program focused on Baha'i Iranians, which led to some 2,500 arriving in the 1980s. From the late 1980s¹ and into the 1990s, Iranians migrating to Australia were a mixture of professionals under the skilled migration program and immigrants accepted for family reunion. Figure 1, which is drawn from the 2011 Census, shows that the number of Iran-born people arriving in Australia was fairly constant until the early 2000s, with a significant increase beginning in 2006.

Figure 1: Year of arrival of those born in Iran



Of course, not all of these were IMAs. Figures on skilled migration show the perhaps surprising statistic that people from Iran were the 9th biggest nationality arriving under the points-tested skilled migration stream in financial year 2011-2012, with 2,390 arrivals. By comparison, the first nationality, India, had 17,030 arrivals in that year and the second nationality, UK, had 9,820 arrivals. The 2011-2012 Iranian skilled migrant volume was a 73% increase over the year before, when 1380 arrived² – and some of these people are likely captured in the 2011 Census numbers charted above.

¹ https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/02_2014/iran.pdf

² <http://www.immi.gov.au/about/reports/annual/2011-12/pdf/>



IRANIAN IMAS

Obtaining a year-by-year series of IMAs and humanitarian program entrants to Australia broken down by nationality is not straightforward. One complication is that Australia's processes for people arriving by boat changed frequently between 2007 and 2014, which means that bureaucratic categories shifted. Furthermore, government departments changed the frequency and content of their reports.

In order to calculate the number of Iranians that have arrived in Australia by boat, we begin with the multiple sets of data in Table 1. This combines Australian Parliament House (APH) reporting on the number of people arriving by boat, for calendar years and financial years,³ with Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP)⁴ reporting on applications for protection visas or refugee status determination requests by IMAs.

Table 1: Number of IMAs reported and number of protection requests reported by IMAs

CALENDAR YEAR	APH: NUMBER OF PEOPLE (EXCLUDES CREW)	FINANCIAL YEAR	APH: NUMBER OF PEOPLE (EXCLUDES CREW)	DIBP: ANNUAL REPORTS	NOTE ON DIBP REPORTING
2009	2,726	2008-09	985	944	Number processed on Christmas Island from 29/07/08 - 30/06/09
2010	6,555	2009-10	5,327	3,966	
2011	4,565	2010-11	4,730	5,175	Requests initiated by IMAs
2012	17,204	2011-12	7,983	7,379	RSD requests for IMAs, according to 2012-13 report
2013	20,587	2012-13	25,173	18,119	RSD requests by IMAs
		2012-13 revised	25,173	8,443	Protection visa applications by IMAs
		2013-14	7474 (first half)	978	Protection visa applications by IMAs

For our purposes, there are two main interpretation challenges. First, DIBP revised its own data substantially from the annual report of 2012-2013 to the annual report of 2013-2014. The original data shows a total of 18,119 refugee status determination requests for 2012-2013, with 4,382 Iranians. The revised data shows only 8,443 protection visa applications, with 1,535 Iranians. It appears that changes to IMA processing resulted in re-categorizing a large number of people, after which they disappear from the statistics.

Second, some discrepancies between numbers arriving and numbers in processing probably arise because of financial year cut-off dates and standard delays in reporting. Regardless, the number of people arriving by boat in 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 is strikingly higher than the number of protection requests (the last three rows of Table 1).

³ http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1314/QG/BoatArrivals

⁴ The department responsible for reporting on refugee processing has changed names over the years – we refer to all previous versions of the department as DIBP.

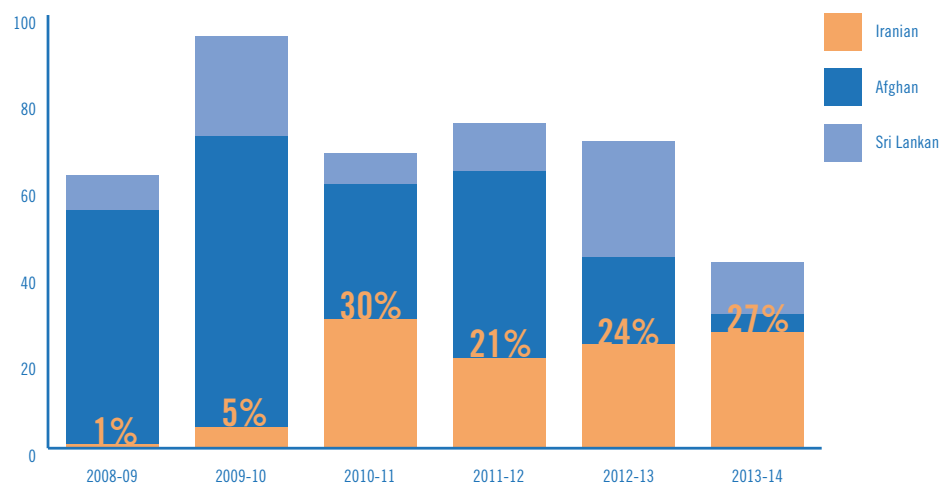
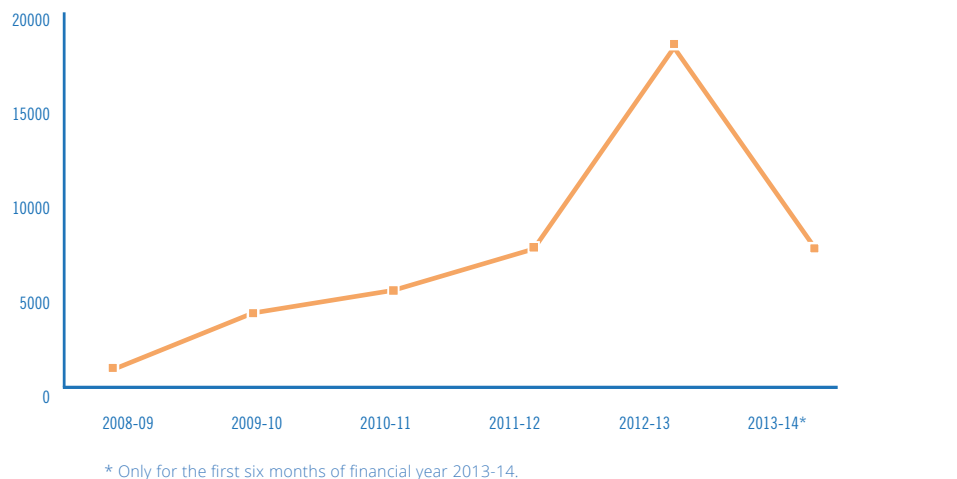


If we want to calculate the number of Iranian IMAs, the difference in totals arriving by boat according to APH and the totals reported by DIBP is important because only the DIBP data shows a breakdown by nationality. The chart at the top of Figure 2 (next page) shows total requests for protection visas⁵ reported by DIBP each financial year. The chart at the bottom shows the proportions of Iranians, Afghans and Sri Lankans in the total mix of protection requests, again as reported by DIBP.

The charts highlight two points about Iranian IMAs. First, the major jump in late 2010 reflects a combination of conditions in Iran, changes in Australia and changes en route. Iranian interviewees regularly refer to political events in 2009 in Iran and subsequent economic stagnation as driving greater interest in departing. On the other side of the equation, by 2010 it can be presumed that Iranians already in Australia were communicating opportunities for irregular migration to their friends and family back home.

Second, major changes in the total number of IMAs have little impact on the representation of Iranians within that flow. For example, from 2010-2011 to 2012-2013 there was a 350% increase in the number of IMAs, but the proportion of Iranians only moved from 30% to 24%. The share of Iranians has expanded and contracted more or less proportionately. Once Iranians joined the flow to Australia, they became a standard component of demand, moving in line with the market for irregular travel overall.

Figure 2: Total number of IMAs (top) and proportion of protection requests by three major nationalities (bottom)



Note: Total IMAs as reported by APH. Protection requests as reported by DIBP each financial year, except for 2008-09 and 2009-10, which are taken from the 2010-11 annual report.

⁵ Or their substantive equivalent, such as refugee status determination requests.

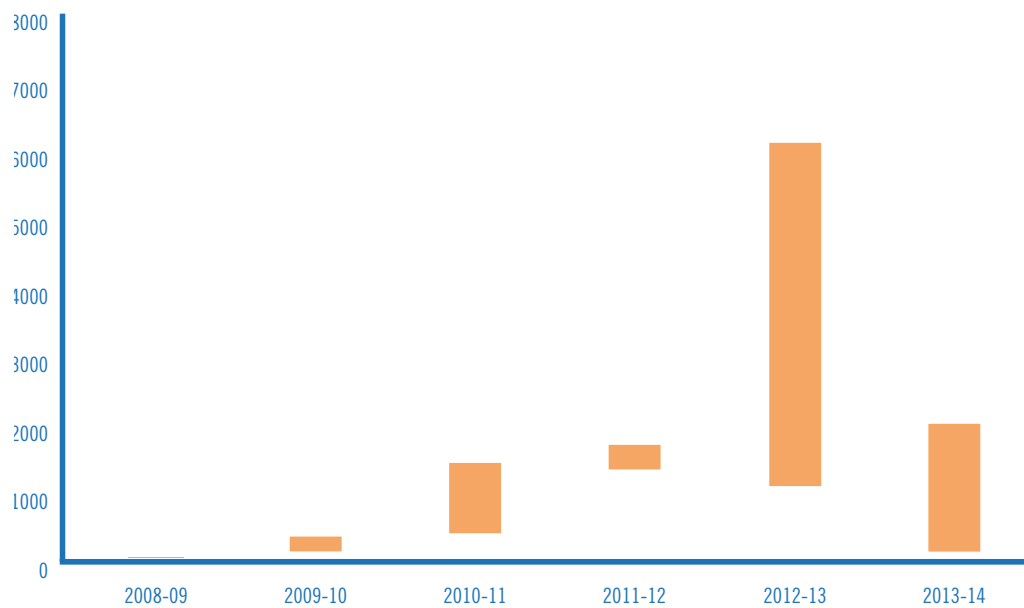


Given the gap between numbers arriving and numbers reported in processing, it is almost certain that the number of Iranians arriving is higher than the number reported to be in a protection assessment process. To estimate the number of Iranians coming to Australia as IMAs, we use two calculations. The minimum estimate takes the number of Iranian IMA protection visas granted. The high estimate takes the proportion of Iranians initiating requests and multiplies this by the number of IMAs reported by APH, noting that this excludes January-June 2014, for which data is unavailable.

The resulting low-high ranges are shown in Figure 3. At least 2,762 Iranians arrived as IMAs and were settled in Australia between July 2008 and June 2014. The high estimate, which is of the number of Iranian IMAs for the same period, totals 11,445 (noting again that this excludes January-June 2014). Of these, 9,755 arrived after July 2011. Very few of them would have been counted in the 2011 Census, which recorded 34,453 Iran-born people in Australia in August 2011.

In addition, a number of Iranians have been resettled from Southeast Asia, primarily Indonesia, without taking a boat for the final step – for example, 605 people were resettled from Indonesia in 2012-13, but their nationalities are unknown.⁶ We also do not know how many Iranians may have ultimately been granted resettlement from Nauru or PNG. With all those caveats, we estimate that irregular maritime travel by Iranians through Southeast Asia has increased the number of Iran-born people in Australia by at least 20% in the last three years.

Figure 3: Low and high estimates of the number of Iranians arriving as IMAs, by financial year



*The high estimate only includes the first six months of financial year 2013-14.

⁶ <http://www.immi.gov.au/about/reports/annual/2012-13/pdf/report-on-performance.pdf>



CURRENT AND FUTURE DEMAND

Australia's changing policies on IMAs inspired us to explore whether they have impacted on Iranian interest in irregular migration to Australia. In December 2014 and January 2015, we interviewed 199 people in southwestern Iran who declared an interest in leaving the country (68 females and 131 males). We then followed up with a smaller number of this group for longer discussions. Engaging people on these topics can be difficult, but we received seemingly candid information on plans and perspectives on irregular migration.

The arrival of small numbers of Iranians by boat in the early 2000s likely supported the subsequent mobilization of larger flows in the late 2000s. A contributing factor may also have been the Iranian diaspora in Malaysia. Smuggler supply chains from Indonesia and Malaysia to Australia were able to take on Iranian demand as it appeared alongside Afghan and Sri Lankan flows. Iranian families in Australia and Iranian recruiters in Iran encouraged people to take the journey to Southeast Asia, where they joined existing networks that put them on boats to Australia. Respondents to our survey were asked about their personal connections to Iranians in other countries, and asked "which country did most of the people you know go to?" 32% chose Australia.

In terms of our respondents' intended destinations, Australia is the fourth most popular, behind the UK, Sweden and Germany. 26 respondents (13%) hold a preference to migrate to Australia and 25 of them have already invested money in a plan to reach Australia, which can be taken as an indicator of commitment to the attempt. Of that 25, six planned to leave in the next three months, 13 in 3-6 months and six had no declared timeline.

Figure 4 shows the most important reason given for wanting to leave. The most common response is that the family is already in Australia, underlining how crucial diasporas are to sustaining migration chains. The second-most common reason, with 31%, is the inability to find a job in Iran. This is consistent with the entire sample's views on why the migrants they know have left Iran in the past (Figure 5).

Figure 4: What is your most important reason for leaving? (Australia only)

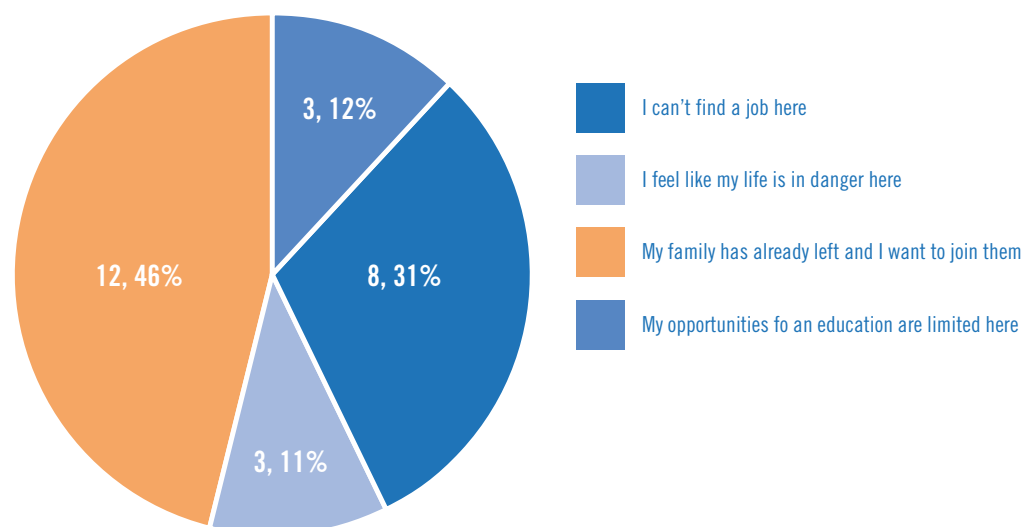
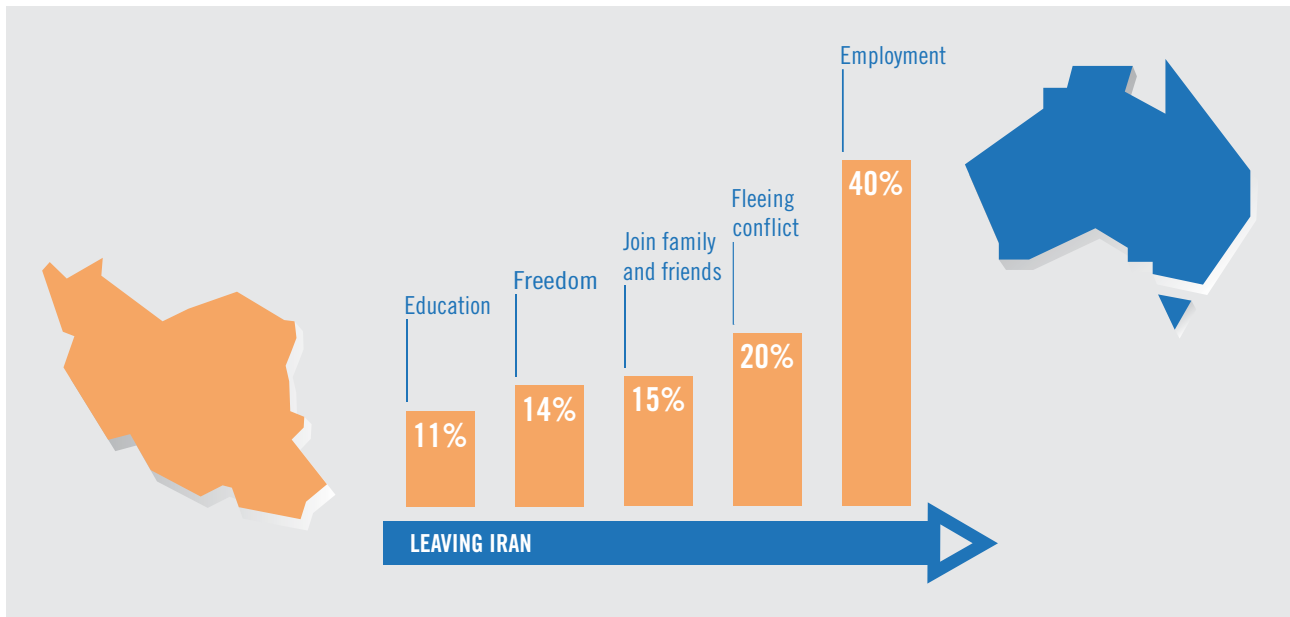


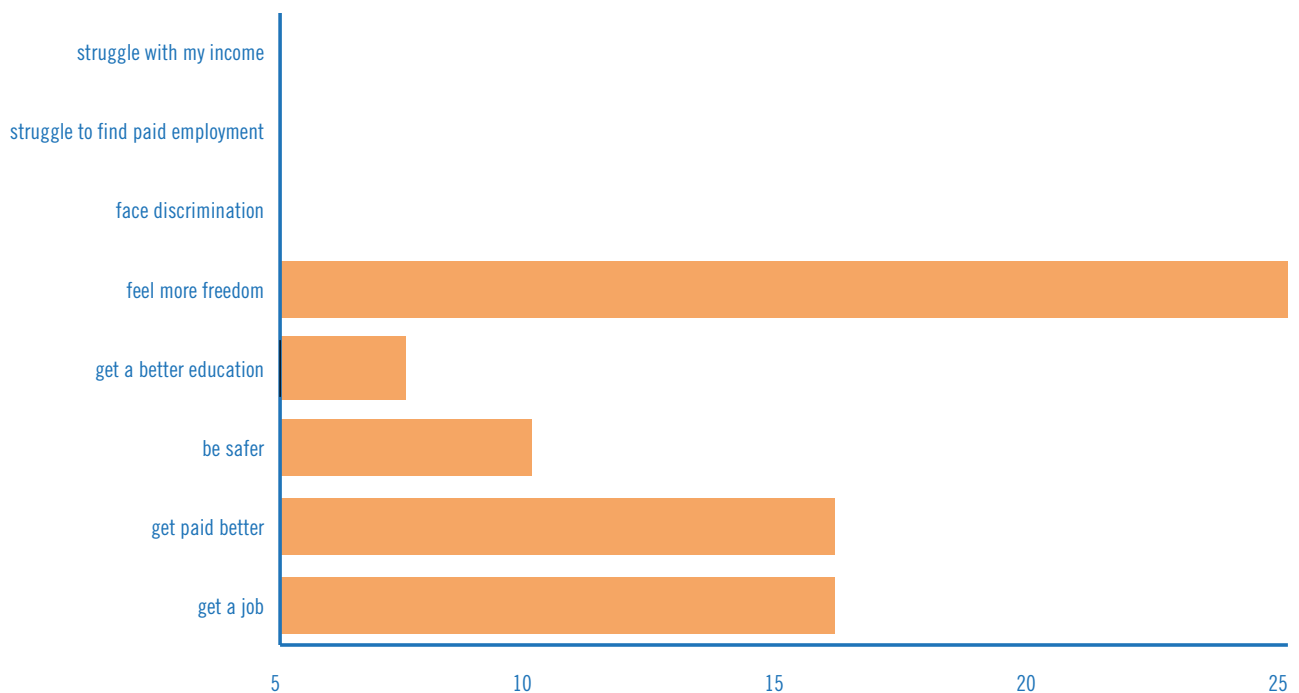


Figure 5: Thinking of the people you know personally, what is the reason they left Iran?



Despite migrants' apparent focus on finding employment and joining family in Australia, Figure 6 shows a general expectation that Australia will provide a feeling of more freedom.

Figure 6: In Australia, I expect that I will...





On the other hand, it also suggests that few people expect any difficulties from settling in Australia: no respondents hold an expectation of struggles with employment or discrimination. Given these are common difficulties for refugees, it may suggest some respondents are being unrealistic, whether through determined optimism or poor information. A typical set of answers shown here combines awareness of more restrictive laws towards immigration with a broader belief that Australia is welcoming towards migrants:

I am aware of the tough immigration laws of the past couple of years and I am prepared for all the consequences, as long as I reach Australia. I am sure my refugee claim will be approved by the Australian government and then I hope to live and start a family in a free country...

The overall treatment of the migrants in Australia has always been positive. You must respect the privacy of all citizens in order to receive respect from them and be treated as a respectable migrant. Australia is a multicultural community and it is based on migrants, who throughout history have migrated to Australia.

When pressed on whether they have any concern that their status or lifestyle will be worse in Australia than in Iran, none of the interviewees admitted to concern, for example:

I have no concern about the lifestyle, considering the presence of friends and family members who certainly will help me to adjust to the new lifestyle in Australia. My main concern remains the duration of our detention prior to receiving refugee status, in order to live freely in the community.

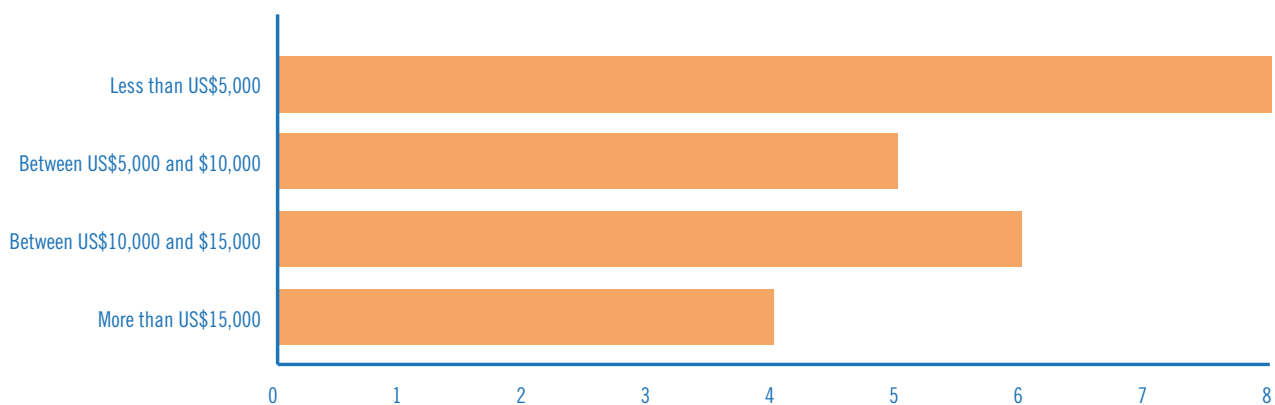
Or, for a similar sentiment from a different respondent:

No, not at all. I am constantly in touch with family and friends living in Australia and none of them faced any challenges adjusting to the lifestyle in Australia, considering it is a community with diverse cultures.

Everyone preparing to go to Australia said that they know someone overseas who can help them with their plan. Interestingly, whereas the sample overall is tending to rely on smugglers, 17 of the people preparing to leave for Australia said their primary overseas supporter and adviser is a friend or family member, and two others said UNHCR. The latter seem to be relying on an agent in Iran to arrange travel for them to Malaysia or Indonesia, then presuming that UNHCR will facilitate their resettlement to Australia.

The expected cost for the journey is shown in Figure 7, with a surprisingly high number of people replying that it will be less than US\$5,000. These people seem to be including only the costs of flying to Malaysia or Indonesia and staying there, while excluding the cost of the follow-on journey to Australia.

Figure 7: Expected cost of the journey (Australia only)





IMPACT OF AUSTRALIAN POLICY CHANGES

Respondents shared their perceptions of migration trends from their community, covering three topics: demand for migration; feasibility of migration; and actual departures. The consensus in the sample overall is that migration has become more popular, it has become more difficult and that more people are departing. Australia's policy changes appear to have played a role in reducing the preference for Australia and encouraging a perception that it has become more difficult to reach Australia. For example, one respondent explained:

he number of people migrating out of Iran had an incredible increase in the period of 2008-2012, when many migrated safely to Australia. But the option of Australia no longer exists and the number of people in comparison now is less than in that period.

Some respondents whose current preferred destination is not Australia mentioned changes to Australian processing as a reason for switching their preference. For example, when she was asked about the research she had done before choosing the UK as her preferred destination, one interviewee explained:

We have done lots of research and inquiries about our destination, also considering the presence of my in-laws there, whom we will rely on to start our life - this is the main reason for our choice of destination. We had previously planned to migrate to Australia but the change of policies there towards migrants has totally changed our mind.

Our respondents appear to be relying on family and friends in Australia for information, rather than mass media, although one person mentioned online sources. A typical explanation of gathering information on the choice of destination was:

I did my research and receive my information from friends and relatives who have migrated over the last few years and are very satisfied with their choice of migrating to Australia.

An obvious implication is that the most influential communications options will be through the diaspora in Australia and on-the-ground conversations in Iran. Mass media, including online channels, may help with atmospherics but are unlikely to influence decisions.

Four respondents had been in Indonesia between 2008 and 2014 for the purpose of reaching Australia, but then returned to Iran. Of these, three are now interested in reaching Europe, while the other is preparing travel to Australia again. Given the possibility that arriving by boat now leads to detention in Papua New Guinea or Nauru, a critical question is why anyone is still planning to take the trip and how they expect to be impacted by Australia's processing regime. We discovered two types of responses.

First, there is a tolerance for long periods of uncertainty in the trip overall, although seemingly optimistic estimates of how long the process might take. For example, one respondent explained:

I am completely aware of the latest restrictions and policies against new refugees arriving in Australia, such as a long process and possible detention period for up to one year. My fiancé and I have committed to such challenges in order to reach our dream of living freely for the rest of our life and establishing a better future for our children. The possibility for married couples to become approved as refugees and to enter the community is much higher than for single migrants.

Taking the long view, another respondent explained:

The laws under the current government are becoming very strict and harsh, but I am sure at one point there will be major changes to the recent policies and once again new migrants will be welcomed as they have been throughout Australian history.



Second, smugglers are moving people by air. For example, one respondent detailed the services provided by the smuggler, with an expected cost of over US\$15,000:

The agent has agreed to provide us with an illegal document for our travel from Malaysia to Australia on the plane. He will also provide us with all the assistance required in Malaysia, which also includes accommodation and arrangements with the kind of border police to board the flight to Australia safely.

A different respondent gave a similar explanation and the same price expectation:

He will assist us for the travel to Malaysia and during our short stay there will provide us with the illegal Australian travel document in order to be able to fly to Australia, which needs the proper arrangement for our safe exit from Malaysia's airport.

Presumably, people arriving by air will end up being processed through the onshore protection visa channel – 561 applications were lodged by people from Iran in 2012-2013 and 361 in 2013-2014, according to DIBP. It could be argued that displacing people from boat travel to air travel is a success for a policy of stopping boat arrivals, although obviously they raise other questions about the integrity of border management.

CONCLUSIONS

The last five years have established demand for irregular migration to Australia among some communities in Iran. The speed with which Iranian demand grew highlights the importance of early action when new nationalities appear in irregular arrival streams, whether by sea or air. Unfamiliar countries of origin can entrench themselves quickly, making the first few hundred arrivals likely to generate thousands more. This reflects a challenge in balancing humanitarian imperatives and border integrity. Perhaps the next test will come from a connection established with Syria, given the settlement of more than 1,000 Syrians in Australia in the last two years.⁷

The fixation on Australia as a destination is not yet as strong among Iranians as it is, for example, among some Afghan communities. In our sample, the orientation towards Australia appears to have weakened recently and many respondents are now departing for Europe. Changes to Australia's processing for boat arrivals appear to contribute to this change. It is likely that flows to Australia would bounce back if policies changed. Migrant smuggling service providers have demonstrated a capacity to resume service quickly. The fact that 13% of respondents to our research are still prepared to take the trip now indicates the resilience of demand. Potential Iranian refugees will retain diaspora connections in Australia and an interest in migrating irregularly to Australia for many years yet.

To receive updates on Iranian refugees and irregular migration, [click here](#).

⁷ <http://www.immi.gov.au/about/reports/annual/2012-13/pdf/report-on-performance.pdf>;
<http://www.immi.gov.au/about/reports/annual/2013-14/pdf/report-on-performance.pdf>



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