



## Articles

# Iranian-American's Perceptions of Prejudice and Discrimination: Differences Between Muslim, Jewish, and Non-Religious Iranian-Americans

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## Abstract

Recent political events have created a political and social climate in the United States that promotes prejudice against Middle Eastern, Iranian, and Muslim peoples. In this study, we were interested in investigating two major questions: (1) How much ethnic harassment do Iranian-American men and women from various religious backgrounds (Muslim, Jewish, or no religious affiliation at all) perceive in their day-to-day interactions? (2) To what extent does the possession of stereotypical Middle Eastern, Iranian, or Muslim traits (an accent, dark skin, wearing of religious symbols, traditional garb, etc.) spark prejudice and thus the perception of ethnic harassment? Subjects were recruited from two very different sources: (1) shoppers at grocery stores in Iranian-American neighborhoods in Los Angeles, and (2) a survey posted on an online survey site. A total of 338 Iranian-Americans, ages 18 and older, completed an in-person or online questionnaire that included the following: a request for demographic information, an assessment of religious preferences, a survey of how "typically" Iranian-American Muslim or Iranian-American Jewish the respondents' traits were, and the Ethnic Harassment Experiences Scale. One surprise was that, in general, our participants reported experiencing a great deal of ethnic harassment. As predicted, Iranian-American Muslim men perceived the most discrimination—far more discrimination than did American Muslim women. Overall, there were no significant differences between the various religious groups. All felt discriminated against. Iranian-American men and women, whose appearance was stereotypically Middle Eastern (i.e., they wore Middle Eastern clothing), who had sub-ethnic identification, and who had lower family income, generally reported experiencing the most prejudice.

**Keywords:** Iranian-American, Muslims, Jews, prejudice, harassment

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## Introduction

At one time, the United States and Iran had fairly cordial relations. When Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was the Shah (from 1941 until his overthrow in 1979) both the U.S. and Great Britain were strong supporters of Iran and the Shah. In 1979, the Ayatollah Khomeini seized power and the Iranian Revolution occurred. He was named Supreme Leader and the country was renamed the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Iranian legal system was replaced by a set of Islamic laws and regulations called *velayat-e faqih*. American-Iranian relations began to deteriorate. In 1979, the Iran Hostage Crisis occurred; 63 American diplomats and citizens were taken and held prisoner in Tehran for 444 days. On September 11, 2001, when al Qaeda supporters flew planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in Washington, D. C., and attempted to fly into the White House, Iranian-American relations plummeted. In 2002, President George W. Bush designated Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as the "Axis of Evil" and

declared Iran a terrorist state. Then (in 2015), President Obama's attempts to persuade Congress to ratify an anti-nuclear agreement with Iran, sparked a Republican political blow-back and reignited anti-Iranian passions.

"Anti-Iranian sentiment" refers to feelings and expression of hostility, hatred, and prejudice directed toward Iran and its culture and toward men and women of Iranian descent. In this paper, we will define prejudice as "thinking ill of others without sufficient warrant" (Allport, 1954, p. 6). Discrimination comes about only when we deny to individuals or groups of people equality of treatment which they may wish" (Allport, 1954, p. 51).

Today, condemnations of Iran are fairly common. Politically conservative commentator Ann Coulter referred to Iranians as "ragheads. Brent Scowcroft, a one-time National Security Agency advisor, called the Iranian people "rug merchants". The *Columbus Dispatch* recently ran a cartoon portraying Iran as a sewer with cockroaches crawling out of it. Debra Cagan, a senior official at The Pentagon, declared: "I hate all Iranians". In March, 2015, John Bolton, one time U. S. ambassador to the United Nations, in a *New York Times* op-ed piece, advised, "To Stop Iran's Bomb, Bomb Iran." (For a comprehensive review of the history of American-Iranian relations and anti-Iranian-American prejudice and discrimination, see Harris, 2012, and Paige, 2014).

When two nations are locked in combat (as were America versus Nazi Germany and Japan in World War II), resentments tend to spill over into the society back home. American citizens begin to resent those whose ethnic backgrounds are different from their own (in World War II that would have been the Germans and the Japanese). The process by which people begin to hate others has been described as the "mirror image" effect (White, 1970). Namely, when two countries, such as Iran and the U.S., have contentious relations, the American majority will tend to label Iran and its citizens as bad and wrong and to justify their own country and people as good and right (Peteraf & Shanley, 1997; White, 1970). Governmental endorsement of negative characterizations, such as former President George W. Bush's Axis of Evil concept, strongly encourages the effect. In the wake of the 1979 Iran Hostage Crisis, for example, 70% of American participants reported a positive image of Americans (considering them as friendly and safe), and a negative image of Iranians (e.g., unfriendly and dangerous) (Johnston Conover, Mingst, & Sigelman, 1980).

Individuals also typically report less favorable attitudes toward members of countries that are culturally dissimilar than those that are similar to their own (Nincic & Russett, 1979; Rouhana & Fiske, 1995). Important cultural dimensions upon which Iran differs from the U.S. are political characteristics, religion, and language. The increased likelihood of favorable attitudes toward those who are culturally similar is due to categorization of individuals as belonging to the in-group (or in a closer relation to the in-group) versus the out-group. The in-group is comprised of the cultural, ethnic, and social groups one feels a part of; the out-group is comprised of social groups one does not associate with or competes with (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Categorizing individuals as part of the in-group versus out-group has significant psychological implications. Differences between the two group are described as the social-cognitive perception of differences between "we and they" (McLaughlin & Pearlman, 2012; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Yamagishi, Mifune, Liu, & Pauling 2008). Individuals sympathize with and feel similar to members of their in-group and dislike and compete with members of the out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Waldzus, Mummendey, & Wenzel, 2005). The out-group categorization of individuals leads to "a negative evaluation of a social group, or a negative evaluation of an individual that is significantly based on the individual's group memberships" (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003, p. 414), in order to maintain a degree of cognitive consistency (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Nail, Bedell, & Little, 2003).

### Perceptions of Iranian-American Men and Women

Iranian-Americans are a diverse group. Although many identify with the Shi'a, Sunni, and Sufi branches of Islam, others consider themselves to be Bahá'í, Christians, Jews, Mandeans, Yarsanis, or Zoroastrians. Some are atheists. They also vary greatly in education, occupation, and income. Household income varies from under \$17,000 to \$100,000 a year and above. (In fact Iranian-Americans' yearly income, education, and occupation exceeds the U. S. national average.) In spite of that diversity, many Americans stereotype Iranian-Americans. [Eagly and Kite \(1987\)](#), for example, surveyed 303 undergraduate students at Purdue University. The students were asked to rate individuals from 28 countries. Participants stereotyped Middle-Eastern and Iranian-American men and women as religious, traditional, and poor. Iranian-American men were stereotyped as hostile, aggressive, never giving up, dirty, proud, and arrogant; Iranian-American women were stereotyped as family oriented, conforming, conservative, proud, devoted to others, honest, and emotional. More recently [Ghavami and Peplau \(2013\)](#) surveyed 627 undergraduates from a Southern California university. They found that Middle Eastern men and women were stereotyped as Muslim, dark-skinned, and religious. Middle Eastern men were stereotyped as anti-West, suspicious, and good at bargaining. Middle Eastern women were stereotyped as quiet, covered, oppressed, family-oriented, having many children, sexually conservative, and (being) housewives.

Consequently, as a result of suffering public disapproval, Middle Easterners and Muslims in the U.S. have been found to be at risk of suffering alienation, isolation, depression, and anxiety ([Britto, 2008](#); [Clay, 2011](#)), and post-traumatic stress disorder ([Clay, 2011](#)). Middle Easterners may potentially experience hate crimes ([Human Rights Watch, 2002](#)), racial profiling ([Siggins, 2002](#)), negativity during job interviews ([King & Ahmad, 2010](#)), prejudice and discrimination within academia ([Omeish, 1999](#)), and confront personal identity issues ([Bradford, 2009](#); [Zaman, 2010](#)).

Such prejudiced attitudes sometimes spill over into hate crimes directed against Middle Easterners and anyone who is assumed to be Middle Eastern or Muslim ([Britto, 2008](#)). According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation reports ([Human Rights Watch, 2002](#)), anti-Middle Eastern hate crimes increased 17-fold from the year 2000 to 2001 (as cited in [Human Rights Watch, 2002](#)).

### Which Iranian-Americans Are Targets of the Most Prejudice, Discrimination, and Violence?

Most past research into the lives of Iranian-Americans has focused on either ethnicity *or* religion. However, it is the intersection of ethnicity (Middle Eastern/Iranian) and religion (Muslim), that seems to spark the biggest spike in prejudice and discrimination ([Human Rights Watch, 2002](#)). Moreover, members of the Middle Eastern community who work at occupations that are more typical for Middle Easterners are generally more likely to be victims of hate crimes ([Human Rights Watch, 2002](#)). For example, taxi drivers, convenience store owners, and motel owners are more likely to experience hate crimes than are those Middle Easterners who do not occupy occupations that are typical for their ethnic group.

Not surprisingly, individuals who are most easily identified as members of the stigmatized are most vulnerable to victimization. Signs of group membership would be a Middle Eastern accent, skin color, the wearing of obvious religious symbols, and dress. Dress includes a hijab for women and a turban for men in the Middle Eastern or Muslim communities. The hijab is a traditional Muslim article of clothing worn by women in the community to cover their hair. The turban is a traditional Middle Eastern (also African and Far Eastern) headwear worn by men of the community, who may belong to a number of religious groups.

## How Do the “Typical” American’s Attitudes Impact Iranian-American Men and Women?

Thus far we have focused on the attitudes of “typical” Americans. Our next question (and the focus of this study) is “How does American’s prejudice and discrimination against Iranian-American Muslim’s effect that target group?” We proposed a series of hypotheses and questions:

**Hypotheses and questions** — We assume that all Middle-Easterners, be they religious or non-religious, male or female, and easily identifiable or noticeable only to the few, might expect to encounter some prejudice. In our study, however, we planned to explore the factors that make men and women especially susceptible to ethnic harassment. Specifically:

Hypothesis I. Gender and religious affiliation (Muslim, Jewish, or no religious affiliation) will affect Iranian-Americans’ perceptions (or experiences) of ethnic harassment. Specifically, Iranian-American *Muslims* will perceive more ethnic harassment than will their non-Muslim peers (be they Jewish or possessing no religious affiliation). Muslim men will experience more harassment than will Muslim women.

We assumed that the experience of Iranian-American men and women might differ, since a variety of authors have found that North-Americans tend to possess more negative stereotypes of Iranian-American men (stereotyping them as hostile, aggressive, never giving up, dirty, proud, and arrogant: [Eagly & Kite, 1987](#)), than of Iranian-American women, (who were stereotyped as family oriented, conforming, conservative, proud, devoted to others, honest, and emotional). More recently [Ghavami and Peplau \(2013\)](#) found that Middle Eastern men and women were stereotyped as Muslim, dark-skinned, and religious. Middle Eastern men were stereotyped as anti-West, suspicious, and good at bargaining. Middle Eastern women were stereotyped as quiet, covered, oppressed, family-oriented, having many children, sexually conservative, and (being) housewives.

Hypothesis II. Iranian-American *Muslims* who possess a strong accent, darker skin color, or who appear prototypically Muslim, engage in displays of religious affiliation, or wear ethnically traditional clothing will perceive more ethnic harassment than will Iranian-American Muslims whose appearance is more prototypically Euro-American. We will also consider generational status, identification with an ethnicity in addition to Iranian-American, family income, and education (as other possible markers of assimilation).

Research has shown that when someone appears more phenotypically prototypical of their race, they are more likely to be perceived as that race. Consequently, it may be that when one appears more phenotypically White that they may experience their identity differently compared to those who cannot as easily “pass” as White ([Wilkins, Kaiser, & Rieck, 2010.](#))

We plan to test Hypothesis II by exploring two separate questions:

Question 1: Are Iranian-American perceptions of ethnic harassment *within the full sample* predicted by Muslim identity, Jewish identity, gender, Iranian accent, skin color, displays of religious affiliation, the wearing of ethnically traditional clothing, generational status, identification with an ethnicity in addition to Iranian-American, family income, and education?

Question 2: Are Iranian-American perceptions of ethnic harassment *within each religious subsample* (Iranian-Americans: Muslim, Jewish, or no religious affiliation,) predicted by gender, Iranian accent, skin color, displays of

religious affiliation, displays of ethnically traditional clothing, generational status, identification with an ethnicity in addition to Iranian-American, family income or education?

To answer these questions we conducted the following study.

## Method

### Participants

Participants consisted of 338 adults (110 men and 228 women), ranging in age from 18 to 68 ( $M = 38$ ,  $SD = 11.67$ ). A full 44% identified as Muslim, 24% identified as Jewish, 32% reported having no religious affiliation, and the rest were Christian or other. Education varied as follows: grade school (2%), high school (12%), vocational degree or certification (4%), BA/BS (34%), MS/MA (24%), or PhD/MD (15%). A few participants failed to indicate their educational level (9%). As is typical of Iranian-Americans, participants were relatively affluent. When asked what their annual household income was during childhood, participants indicated the following: Under \$17,000 (4%), \$17,000-\$24,999 (5%), \$25,000-\$49,999 (13%), \$50,000-\$99,999 (37%), and \$100,000+ (41%).

Participants were asked to indicate their geographic location. Participants came from the following areas: Los Angeles, CA (28%), Orange County, CA (28%), California (30%), Orange County or Los Angeles (1%), or other (13%).

Forty-two percent of participants were interviewed face-to-face and 58% were recruited online. The in-person participants were approached at two ethnically Persian (Iranian) grocery stores, Jordan Market and Super Sun, on Westwood Boulevard in West Los Angeles. Dr. Paige, who speaks Farsi, conducted all the interviews.

Iranian-American participants, who took an online survey, were recruited in a variety of ways. We collaborated with the Persian American Society for Health Advancement (PASHA—a non-religious organization which includes Jewish, Muslim, and Iranian-Americans with various religious affiliations). We also contacted a number of Iranian-American organizations and asked them to distribute information about the survey.<sup>i</sup> We also sent invitations to a number of synagogues.<sup>ii</sup> Finally, we contacted individuals with ethnically Iranian names and invited them to complete the survey, via LinkedIn.com. Surveys were conducted on an on-line survey site and available via Facebook.com and LinkedIn.com.

### Measures

**Ethnic identity** — Our first step was to ascertain that participants were Iranian-American. All were. Then, to gain a fuller picture of subjects' backgrounds, we asked a few supplementary questions. These included: "Do you identify with any other ethnic group besides Iranian-American? (e.g., Azerbaijani, Afghani, Bahrani, etc.?)" About half of subjects identified with an additional sub-ethnic group (say, for example, Turkish-Iranian). Participants' generational status was also assessed. The majority of participants were born outside the U. S. (81%). The remainder (19%) were born in America.

Independent Variables:

We asked a series of questions in order to ascertain how "typically" (i.e., stereotypically) Middle Eastern, Iranian-American, or Muslim participants would appear to be from their accent, skin tone, or appearance. We included the following questions:

**Gender** — The Demographic Questionnaire asked respondents to indicate their Gender. It was also obvious from their appearance.

**Religious affiliation** — The Demographic Questionnaire asked: “What is your religious affiliation? Please write none if you have no religious affiliation.” Respondents were given a space to indicate their religious preferences, if any.

**Accent** — Participants were asked, “Do you consider yourself to have an Iranian accent when speaking English?” Possible responses ranged from 1 = Not at all to 7 = Acute. A full 32% checked “Not at all,” 13% indicated between “Not at all” and “mild,” 15% reported “mild,” 5% reported an accent between “mild” and “moderate,” 17% reported “moderate,” 12% reported between “moderate” and “acute,” 6% reported having an “acute” accent. The higher the score, the stronger the Iranian the accent is.

**Skin tone** — Participants were asked to match their own skin tone to exemplars on The Fitzpatrick Scale, a color chart depicting various skin types (Daniel, Heckman, Kloss, & Manne, 2009). Possible hues ranged from Type 1 (Red and blonde hair, blue eyes, burns easily, never tans, freckles, very fair skin) to Type 6 (Black hair, dark brown eyes. May never burn). The majority of participants (61%) rated their skin tone as a 4 on the Fitzpatrick Scale (i.e., as possessing “dark brown hair and green, hazel, or brown eyes. Slow to burn, tans easily”). The higher the score, the darker the participant’s skin tone.

**Symbols of religious affiliation** — Participants were asked, “Do you wear symbols of your religious affiliation? (e.g., cross, yarmulke, turban, scarf, etc.)” Most participants reported “never” displaying religious symbols (71%), others reported “sometimes” or “always” displaying such symbols (29%). Possible answers ranged from 0 = no to 1 = yes (i.e., sometimes or always).

Next, participants who wore such symbols were asked: “If so, what do you wear?” The majority reported wearing a scarf/hijab (15%), displaying the Star of David (3%), a yarmulke (2%), a *faravahar* (symbol of Zoroastrianism) (1%), an Allah necklace (1%), or religious jewelry (5%). Less than 2% of participants reported displaying: a Kara (steel bangle worn by Sikhs) (0.3%), evil eye jewelry (0.3%), a cross (0.3%), a beard (0.3%), an Islamic Stone (0.3%), or *tasbeih* prayer beads (0.5%). (This specific information was not used in the analyses.)

**Ethnically traditional clothing** — Participants were asked, “Do you wear ethnically traditional clothing? (e.g., clothing worn in non-urban areas of Iran, such as Mahali clothing)?” The majority (94%) of participants reported “never” wearing such clothing. A small percentage of participants (5%) reported “sometimes” wearing such clothing. No participant reported “always” wearing such clothing. Scores ranged from 0 = no to 1 = yes.

Those who wore such clothing were asked when they did so. Answers were assigned to the following categories: seldom (2%), on Halloween (1%), ethnic/cultural events (2%), once a month (1%), or very often (1%). When asked what kind of ethnic clothing they wore, they indicated the following: *thobe/dishdasha* (0.3%), *mahali* dress (1.1%), colorful scarf (0.8%), scarfs/jewelry (0.3%), or bags/scarves/jewelry/skirt (1.6%). Again, this specific information was not used in the analyses.

**Family income** — As indicated earlier, participants were asked what their annual household income had been during childhood. (We thought this might affect their socialization and education). Alternatives ranged from Under \$17,000 to \$100,000+. The higher the number, the richer the family had been during the participant’s childhood.

**Education** — Participants were asked how much education they had completed. Education varied as follows: grade school (2%), high school (12%), vocational degree or certification (4%), BA/BS (34%), MS/MA (24%), or PhD/MD (15%). A few participants failed to indicate their educational level (9%). The more education they had, the higher was the participants' score.

**Occupation** — Participants were asked: "What is your occupation?" We converted specific occupations to more general categories. Answers (after our conversion) were: white collar (84%), blue collar (1%), homemaker (10%), or other (5%). The higher the score, as measured by traditional rankings of SES of occupation, the higher the participants' SES was assumed to be.

In order to gain a better understanding of participants' backgrounds, we asked two additional questions (not used in the analyses): "What was your father's occupation?" Again, following the same procedure, specific responses were placed in the following categories: White collar (75%), blue collar (3%), Army (8%), or other (14%). "What was your mother's occupation?" Again, participants' responses were placed in the following categories: White collar (36%), blue collar (0%), homemaker (35%), or other (29%). This specific information was not used in our analyses.

**Dependent variable** — We included a single scale designed to assess the dependent variable: The Ethnic Harassment Experiences Scale.

Participants were asked to indicate whether they had experienced any ethnic harassment within the last 24 months. Five exemplars were provided: 1) Someone made derogatory comments about your ethnicity. 2) Someone used ethnic slurs to describe you. 3) Someone made racist or prejudiced comments about you or your ethnicity. (For example saying people of your ethnicity aren't very smart). 4) Someone tells jokes about your ethnic group, and 5) Someone excludes you from social interactions because of your ethnicity. Possible responses on each item ranged from 0 (never), 1 sometimes, and 2 (almost always) (Schneider, 2005). Possible (average) scores ranged from 0 to 2. The higher the score, the greater the degree of perceived ethnic harassment (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ ).

### Procedure

We recruited face-to-face participants from grocery stores two weeks prior to Persian New Year because many Iranian-Americans shop for groceries right before the holidays. Dr. Paige approached participants by introducing herself in Farsi. She then translated questions into Farsi or English, as the respondent preferred. The survey was completed with paper and pen. Participants who were recruited online were provided with a link to our online survey site.

The surveys included a consent form and the following scales: 1) a demographic questionnaire (which included such questions as gender, age, ethnic identity, and religion.) They were also asked about the possession of a foreign accent, generational status, skin tone/color, displays of religiously symbolic clothing, displays of ethnically traditional clothing, highest level of education, family income during childhood, occupation, father's occupation, mother's occupation, and geographic location). The questions were randomized whenever possible to control for ordering effects.

## Results

### Hypothesis I

Gender and religious affiliation (Muslim, Jewish, or no religious affiliation) will affect Iranian-Americans' perceptions (or experiences) of ethnic harassment. Specifically, Iranian-American *Muslims* will perceive more ethnic harassment than will their non-Muslim peers (be they Jewish or possessing no religious affiliation). Muslim men will perceive more ethnic harassment than do Muslim women.

Table 1 shows descriptive information in order to explore the relationships between gender and religious affiliation with regard to perceptions of Euro-American ethnic harassment. In general, both men and women reported surprisingly high levels of ethnic harassment. Participants with different religion affiliations also perceived a great deal of ethnic harassment.

Table 1

*Perceptions of Ethnic Harassment for Gender and Religion Affiliation*

Gender	Religion Affiliation									Total		
	No Religion			Jewish			Muslim					
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Men	1.49	0.42	52	1.39	0.37	24	1.59	0.44	34	1.50	0.42	110
Women	1.47	0.38	55	1.51	0.50	58	1.40	0.36	115	1.45	0.41	228
Total	1.48	0.40	107	1.48	0.47	82	1.45	0.39	149	1.47	0.41	338

*Note.* The higher the number the greater the perception of ethnic harassment.

We conducted a two-way ANOVA to explore whether or not there was a significant effect of gender and/or religion on perceptions of ethnic harassment. Results indicate that there was a statistically significant interaction between the effects of gender and religion affiliation on perceptions of ethnic harassment,  $F(2,332) = 3.18$ ,  $p = .04$ , effect size  $\eta^2 = .02$ . Figure 1 shows the mean perception of ethnic harassment score for each combination of gender groups and religion affiliation groups, plotted in a line graph. Simple mean effects analysis showed that, as predicted, Muslim men perceived more ethnic harassment than did Muslim women ( $p = .02$ ), but there were no significant differences between men and women in the Jewish group ( $p = .22$ ) nor in the No religion group ( $p = .80$ ).

Main effects analysis showed that there was no significant effect for gender on perceptions of ethnic harassment,  $F(1,332) = 0.36$ ,  $p = .55$ , and there was no significant differences between religion affiliation groups on perceptions of ethnic harassment,  $F(2,332) = 0.26$ ,  $p = .77$ .



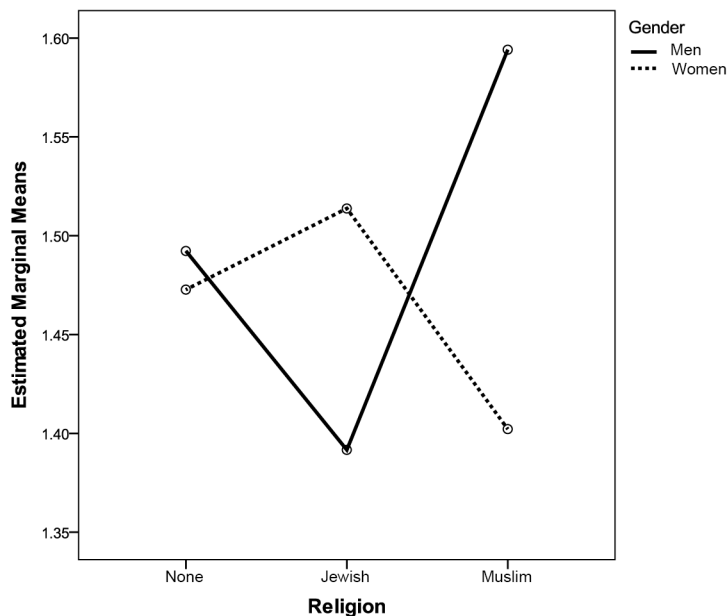


Figure 1. Mean ethnic harassment score by gender and religion affiliations.

Note. The higher the number, the greater the perception of ethnic harassment.

## Hypothesis II

Iranian-American *Muslims* who possess a strong accent, darker skin color, or who appear prototypically Muslim, engage in displays of religious affiliation, or wear ethnically traditional clothing will perceive more ethnic harassment than will Iranian-American Muslims whose appearance is more prototypically Euro-American. We will also consider generational status, identification with an ethnicity in addition to Iranian-American, family income, and education (as other possible markers of assimilation).

We tested Hypothesis II by exploring two separate questions:

**Question 1** — Are Iranian-American perceptions of ethnic harassment *within the full sample* predicted by Muslim identity, Jewish identity, gender, Iranian accent, skin color, displays of religious affiliation, the wearing of ethnically traditional clothing, generational status, identification with an ethnicity in addition to Iranian-American, family income, and education?

First, bivariate correlation was used to address relationships between predictors and outcome variable. When the variables were continuous variables, a Pearson correlation was conducted; when the variables were categorical variables, a point-biserial correlation was conducted. Table 2 shows the correlations. The first thing we learn from Table 2 is how strongly correlated these dependent variables are. Sub-ethnic identification, for example, is significantly correlated with every one of our eight other indicators of Middle-Eastern and Muslim appearance. Turning to our predictions, the results showed that perceptions of ethnic harassment were significantly correlated with the wearing of ethnically traditional clothing, sub-ethnic identification, and family income.

Table 2

## Correlations

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Skin tone	1							
2. Iranian Accent	.01	1						
3. Displays of Religious Affiliation	-.10	.31**	1					
4. Ethnically Traditional Clothing	-.05	.09	.02	1				
5. Generations Status	-.02	.44**	.16**	-.06	1			
6. Sub Ethnic Identification	.13*	-.41**	-.33	.15**	-.20**	1		
7. Family Income	-.08	.03	-.02	-.03	-.13*	-.36**	1	
8. Education	.06	-.10	-.19**	.08	.14*	.20**	-.14*	1
9. Ethnic Harassment	-.11	.07	.06	.13*	-.05	.14*	-.24**	-.03

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

Secondly, we conducted a multiple linear regression to test the predictive strength of the following predictors: skin tone (color), Iranian accent, displays of religious affiliation, ethnically traditional clothing, generational status, sub-ethnic identification (other than Iranian-American), family income, and education on average reports of perceived ethnic harassment from Euro-American. Table 3 presents these results. The eight predictors combined accounted for 12.1% of ethnic harassment variance,  $F(8, 257) = 4.44$ ,  $p = .00$ , and the effect size  $\eta^2$  was .14. Skin tone was significantly (and negatively) associated with perceptions of ethnic harassment,  $t(257) = -2.84$ ,  $p = .01$ . Iranian accent was significantly (and positively) associated with perceptions of ethnic harassment positively,  $t(257) = 2.80$ ,  $p = .01$ ; Sub-ethnic identification was significantly (and positively) associated with perception of ethnic harassment positively,  $t(257) = 2.44$ ,  $p = .02$ ; Family income was significantly (and negatively) associated with perceptions of ethnic harassment,  $t(257) = -2.60$ ,  $p = .01$ . Namely, the richer your family, the less prejudice you encounter.

Table 3

## Prediction of Ethnic Harassment by Predictors

Model	B	SE B	$\beta$	t	p
Constant	1.87	0.20	—	—	—
Skin Tone	-0.08	0.03	-.17	-2.84	.01
Iranian Accent	0.04	0.01	.19	2.80	.01
Displays of Religious Affiliation <sup>a</sup>	0.09	0.06	.09	1.46	.15
Ethnically Traditional Clothing <sup>a</sup>	0.11	0.11	.06	1.04	.30
Generational Status <sup>b</sup>	-0.10	0.07	-.09	-1.39	.17
Sub Ethnic Identification <sup>a</sup>	0.14	0.06	.18	2.44	.02
Family Income	-0.07	0.03	-.17	-2.60	.01
Education	0.01	0.02	.03	0.64	.64

Note.  $F = 4.44$ .  $p = .00$ .  $R^2 = .121$ .

<sup>a</sup>0 = No, 1 = Yes. <sup>b</sup>0 = born in USA, 1 = Born in somewhere else.

**Question 2** — Are Iranian-American perceptions of ethnic harassment *within each religious subsample* (Iranian-Americans: Muslim, Jewish, or no religious affiliation,) predicted by gender, Iranian accent, skin color, displays of

religious affiliation, displays of ethnically traditional clothing, generational status, identification with an ethnicity in addition to Iranian-American, family income or education?

A multiple linear regression was conducted for Jewish (Table 4), Muslim (Table 5), and no religion group (Table 6) separately to compare religious affiliation differences on predicting perceptions of ethnic harassment by the eight predictors. For Jewish group, Iranian accent, display of religious affiliation, and sub-ethnic identification predicted perceptions of ethnic harassment positively,  $t(60) = 2.92, p = .00$ ,  $t(60) = 2.71, p = .01$ , and  $t(60) = 2.07, p = .04$ , separately; Family income approached predicted perceptions of ethnic harassment negatively,  $t(60) = -1.77, p = .08$ . For the Muslim group, skin tone (negatively) predicted perceptions of ethnic harassment,  $t = -2.79, p = .00$ ; Sub-ethnic identification nearly predicted perceptions of ethnic harassment,  $t(101) = 1.18, p = .07$ . For the no religion group, (obviously there can be no displays of religious affiliation). Education (negatively) predicted perceptions of ethnic harassment,  $t(75) = -2.41, p = .02$ ; family income nearly predicted perceptions of ethnic harassment negatively,  $t(75) = -1.93, p = .06$ .

Table 4

*Prediction of Ethnic Harassment by Predictors for Jewish Group*

Model	B	SE B	$\beta$	t	p
Constant	1.92	0.49	—	—	—
Skin Tone	-0.11	0.08	-.17	-1.50	.14
Iranian Accent	0.08	0.03	.36	2.92	.00
Displays of Religious Affiliation <sup>a</sup>	0.32	0.12	.30	2.71	.01
Ethnically Traditional Clothing <sup>a</sup>	0.26	0.27	.09	0.96	.34
Generational Status <sup>b</sup>	-0.19	0.15	-.15	-1.21	.23
Sub Ethnic Identification <sup>a</sup>	0.43	0.21	.24	2.07	.04
Family Income	-0.12	0.07	-.21	-1.77	.08
Education	0.06	0.05	.14	1.21	.23

Note.  $F = 6.50, p = .00, R^2 = .464$ .

<sup>a</sup>0 = No, 1 = Yes. <sup>b</sup>0 = born in USA, 1 = Born somewhere else.

Table 5

*Prediction of Ethnic Harassment by Predictors for Muslim Group*

Model	B	SE B	$\beta$	t	p
Constant	2.05	0.35	—	—	—
Skin Tone	-0.12	0.05	-.27	-2.79	.00
Iranian Accent	0.04	0.02	.19	1.70	.10
Displays of Religious Affiliation <sup>a</sup>	-0.12	0.09	-.15	-1.37	.17
Ethnically Traditional Clothing <sup>a</sup>	-0.01	0.21	-.01	-0.05	.96
Generational Status <sup>b</sup>	-0.11	0.11	-.11	-0.99	.33
Sub Ethnic Identification <sup>a</sup>	0.17	0.09	.21	1.81	.07
Family Income	-0.03	0.04	-.07	-0.65	.52
Education	-0.01	0.03	-.02	-0.17	.86

Note.  $F = 2.46, p = .02, R^2 = .163$ .

<sup>a</sup>0 = No, 1 = Yes. <sup>b</sup>0 = born in USA, 1 = Born in somewhere else.

Table 6

Prediction of Ethnic Harassment by Predictors for No Religion Group

Model	B	SE B	$\beta$	t	p
Constant	1.87	0.20	—	—	—
Skin Tone	-0.08	0.03	-.17	-1.46	.15
Iranian Accent	0.04	0.01	.19	-0.72	.47
Displays of Religious Affiliation <sup>a</sup>	0.09	0.06	.09	1.41	.16
Ethnically Traditional Clothing <sup>a</sup>	0.11	0.11	.06	0.76	.45
Generational Status <sup>b</sup>	-0.10	0.07	-.09	-0.30	.77
Sub Ethnic Identification <sup>a</sup>	0.14	0.06	.18	-0.61	.55
Family Income	-0.07	0.03	-.17	-1.93	.06
Education	0.01	0.02	.03	-2.41	.02

Note.  $F = 2.14$ .  $p = .04$ .  $R^2 = .186$ .

<sup>a</sup>0 = No, 1 = Yes. <sup>b</sup>0 = born in USA, 1 = Born in somewhere else.

## Discussion

### Summary of Key Findings

Our primary hypothesis was that Iranian-American *Muslims*, especially Muslim *men*, would report more ethnic harassment than would their non-Muslim peers (be they Jewish or possessing no religious affiliation). The first hypothesis was only partially supported. To our surprise, we discovered that all of our participants reported surprisingly high levels of ethnic harassment. Consistent with our hypotheses, however, Muslim men reported the highest levels of harassment—and certainly far more harassment than Muslim women reported.

The difference between Muslim men and Muslim women is dramatic. The reasons for this marked difference may be twofold: 1) Iranian-American women may seem less threatening due to their double minority status as women and Iranians, 2) Iranian-American men may seem more threatening due to their appearance, size, and social power than do women.

Social Dominance Theory (SDT) (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006) may also be used to explain why Iranian-American Muslim men reported higher rates of ethnic harassment than did Iranian-American Muslim women (and presumably their peers). SDT suggests that society is made up of social hierarchies. One social hierarchy in the U.S., as it pertains to the current study, is comprised of Euro-American men as the dominant group and in descending order, Iranian-American men, and then Iranian-American women. According to SDT, Iranian-American men may experience more ethnic harassment as an attempt by the dominant group to maintain the social hierarchy and power differentials within society. Iranian-American women are viewed as non-threatening and unimportant to maintaining the social power and hierarchy of Euro-American men.

The second hypothesis was that Iranian-American *Muslims* who appear prototypically Muslim (possessing a strong accent, darker skin color, engaging in displays of religious affiliation, or wearing ethnically traditional clothing) would perceive more ethnic harassment than would Iranian-American Muslims whose appearance is more prototypically Euro-American. We also considered generational status, identification with an ethnicity in addition to Iranian-American, family income, and education (as other possible markers of assimilation).

We tested this hypothesis by asking two questions:

Are Iranian-American perceptions of ethnic harassment *within the full sample* predicted by Iranian accent, skin color, displays of religious affiliation, the wearing of ethnically traditional clothing, generational status, identification with an ethnicity in addition to Iranian-American, family income, and education? Are Iranian-American perceptions of ethnic harassment *within each religious subsample* (Iranian-Americans: Muslim, Jewish, or no religious affiliation), predicted by these same variables?

In the total sample we found some evidence that the more prototypically Iranian-American one appears to be the more prejudice one encounters. In various analyses, with various sub-groups, we found that skin-tone, an Iranian accent, displays of religious affiliation, the wearing of ethnically traditional clothing, sub-ethnic identification, and a lack of income may increase one's vulnerability to harassment.

One surprise was that (although the correlations were not large), for the Muslims, a *lighter* skin tone was associated with more harassment. Why that would be, we do not know. Lighter skin tone preference and more favorable treatment of individuals with lighter skin complexions have been widely researched in the past (Jones, 2000). We could only come up with one hypothesis, and that was not very compelling. Perhaps Iranian-American Muslims with lighter skin tones appear European and many Euro-Americans may not immediately identify their Middle Eastern ethnicity. Thus, Iranian-Americans with lighter skin tones may witness Euro-Americans unknowingly express their prejudices toward Middle Easterners in front of them. This additional exposure to prejudicial attitudes of Euro-Americans may lead to higher rates of perceived ethnic harassment. A second argument is that lighter skinned Iranian-American Muslims feel unaccepted from both the mainstream Euro-American group and from within Muslim-Americans as a whole. The idea is that if they appear more European, then in-group members may feel that the "assimilated" do not experience the same level of prejudice and discrimination they do—resulting in prejudice toward them for their alleged privilege.

For Iranian-Americans (as a whole) and Iranian-American Jews (in particular), an Iranian accent is associated with perceived prejudice. This is consistent with past research, which has demonstrated higher rates of prejudice and discrimination toward individuals with foreign accents (Lippi-Green, 1994). Iranian-American Jews were the only group that reported significantly higher rates of perceived ethnic harassment when displaying symbols of religious affiliation.

For the group as a whole, and Jews in particular, identification with sub-ethnic groups increased one's vulnerability to harassment. We can conceive of several reasons for this. Perhaps Jews, a minority within a minority in any case, fare even worse when they possess a blended ethnicity and do not really fit in anywhere. Perhaps those from mixed ethnicities come from poorer, marginalized countries. Answering this question requires more research.

### Limitations and Strengths

One limitation is that in this study we did not take into account degree of assimilation into the U.S. culture and society. This raises the question of how religious affiliation may affect intra- and inter-group perceptions of assimilation. Considering the Judeo-Christian roots of the United States, the dynamic of what traits define American identity (in the context of assimilation) could be studied on a continuum. It would be interesting for future researchers to explore what (if any) social, political, or economic benefits or privileges Iranian-Americans gain through assimilation, taking into account religious affiliation.

While conducting the study in Southern California afforded access to a large number of Iranian-Americans, we still faced a number of limitations. Recruiting from the Southern California region came with some drawbacks. First off, an overwhelming majority of the Iranian-American Muslim and Jewish participants were recruited from either Orange County or West Los Angeles. Both of these Southern California regions are affluent and median incomes far exceed national averages (Orange County, *Mdn* = \$75,762, Century City (West LA), *Mdn* = \$95,135, National Average = \$42,979.61). Thus, the results of the study are limited to representing Iranian-Americans from those regions.

The Southern California region is also limited to representing Iranian-Americans living in a state that predominantly votes for the Democratic Party in elections. *The LA Times* described Southern California as a “melting pot” (meaning a place with a high degree of cultural diffusion) with diverse communities and neighborhoods that represent a number of racial ethnic groups. Despite the general political and cultural characteristics of California, Orange County is heavily populated with a majority of Republicans. It is unclear how the political nature of the regions affects the perceptions and experiences of Iranian-Americans. Nevertheless, the state is heavily populated with immigrants and is inclusive of cultures from many parts of the world.

Some of the unique challenges we faced surveying Iranian-Americans were cultural mistrust, refusal to denote religious affiliation, and the fact that most participants were immigrants or refugees. While conducting the current study, we found that many Iranian-Americans were extremely suspicious about how the information would be utilized. Many asked if there would be governmental tracking. Upon further conversation many participants voiced such a concern. They described how in Iran government officials would ask about political attitudes in a seemingly safe environment, only to persecute individuals who had opinions against the regime. As a result, many participants felt that a similar strategy could be employed in the U.S. Thus, a large number of individuals refused to take the survey and many were very hesitant in answering questions about ethnic harassment from Euro-Americans. We assured participants, who did complete the survey, that it was confidential and that the only information that could be derived was general demographic traits.

Another interesting finding was that many Iranian-Americans did not want to disclose their religious affiliation. Perhaps this refusal was due to fear of social marginalization or discrimination. This was evident in a few participants who reported not having any religious affiliation but “sometimes” (6%) or “always” (2%) displaying symbols of religious affiliation. This anomaly may also have occurred because these individuals perceived religion as part of their ethnic identity and did not make a religious distinction within their personal identity. Hence some participants verbally identified as Iranian-American Jewish without being asked about religious affiliation. This area requires additional research.

Another challenge was that most Iranian-Americans surveyed were born outside the U.S. We failed to ask if they were refugees. The psyche, mentality, and culture of a refugee are significantly different from that of an immigrant.

One *advantage* of conducting the study in Southern California is that there is a significantly large population of Iranian-Americans. Large populations of Iranian-Americans reside in the areas of Orange County (the city of Irvine) and Los Angeles. In fact Los Angeles has the largest number of Iranians outside of Iran. The majority of Iranian-American Jews in the study were recruited from West Los Angeles. The majority of Iranian-American Muslims were recruited from Orange County. It is unclear if there are more or fewer Iranian-American Muslims in Orange County versus Los Angeles, since the majority of past researchers have only asked about ethnicity.

Lastly, it was advantageous that Dr. Paige speaks Farsi with native fluency. This aided with translation and cultural mistrust issues. It also helped her get endorsements and collaborative efforts from Iranian-American organizations.

### Concluding Comments

Future studies may aim to mitigate the challenges we have mentioned. One remedy would be to interview a nationally representative sample of Iranian-American Muslims, Jews, Christians, and atheists. Such recruitment would thus ensure the inclusion of Iranian-American Jews and Muslims who display higher degrees of symbols of religious affiliation and participants from a wider range of education and income. Lastly, future researchers should also include a higher number of men.

The current study demonstrated the complex social identities of Iranian-Americans. As is evident in the results enumerated above, Iranian-American perceptions are significantly influenced by gender and religious affiliation. We hope that researchers will begin to examine Iranian-American identity in a more multi-dimensional manner that takes into account the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, and religion. The study also demonstrated that Iranian-American Muslims, Jews and those with no religious affiliation are vulnerable and perceive high rates of ethnic harassment from Euro-Americans. Thus, this is an issue (once replicated) that should be taken into account when developing policy and standards of practice both in public and private organizations.

### Notes

i) These were: University of Maryland Iranian Student Foundation, Persian American Association of Northern California, Iranian-American Women's Foundation, Persian Student Association at Stanford University, Iranian Student Alliance in America at UC Berkeley, Association of Professors & Scholars of Iranian Heritage, Iranian Students Association at Arizona State University, Pars Times, Iranian-American Cultural Association of Missouri, Iranian-American Bar Association, Persian Academic & Cultural Student Association at the University of Southern California, and The Persian American Society for Health Advancement.

ii) These were: Chabad of Bel Air, Beth Jacob Congregation, Congregation Magen David of Beverly Hills, Young Israel of North Beverly Hills, LeoBaeck Temple, and University Synagogue. The aforementioned synagogues were emailed because they are located in or around the Beverly Hills area. According to National Public Radio (Montagne, 2006), 20% of individuals living in Beverly Hills are Iranian-American and 40% of students who attend schools in the area are Iranian-American. Alas, most did not reply.

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The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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