

## Integration, class and secularism

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# **Integration, Class and Secularism: The Marginalization of Shia Identities in the UK Iranian Diaspora**

## **Abstract**

Despite ongoing debates about the nature and role of multiculturalism in the UK, the idea of integration remains significant in British immigration policies and community relations, and it orients itself towards second and third-generation diasporans as well as recent arrivals. Drawing on original data from the UK Iranian diaspora, this paper aims to complicate extant debates by exploring the cultural dimensions of integration mainly at the intra-diasporic level. Particularly among secular middle-class UK Iranians, 'integration' acts as an idiom for being a 'good', 'successful', 'proper' Iranian, and a failure to integrate is often described as unacceptable and even shameful. Integration in this sense mirrors dominant neo-liberal attitudes and puts huge pressure on Iranians to constantly 'do better' in cultural and economic terms to justify their presence in the UK. Crucially, these processes are predicated on a critique and/or rejection of Iranian Shiism and Islam in general, thus helping to marginalize Iranian Shia identities in representations of Iranian-ness in the British mainstream. We argue, therefore, that dominant policies and discourses of integration, regardless of their stated intention, intersect with the multiple and competing realities that exist in a diasporic community to produce particular social and cultural relations which may exclude identities protected under UK law. However, we also draw comparison with the US to suggest that these dynamics might begin to change in the near future.

## **Keywords:**

British-Iranians, integration, Shiism, diaspora, secularism, multiculturalism

## **Introduction: the integration debate**

Although the UK does not have a blanket integration policy to address the various categories of its immigrants, the idea of integration nonetheless has a continuous and significant presence in British politics and community relations. As such, the discourse of integration orients itself towards the descendants of immigrants as much as it is aimed at recent arrivals. In Britain, integration has broadly been thought of as a set of civic processes whose aim is to render unproblematic social differences such as religion and ethnicity (Modood 2012). On the whole, British integration policies, such as the Race Relations Acts, have been informed by a commitment to multiculturalism. A mainstay of British politics especially in the latter half of the twentieth century, multiculturalism fell out of favour with the political establishment in Britain

and much of Europe in the early part of this century. Despite that, Meer and Modood (2014) argue that the category to which the term refers continues to be highly robust and relevant. Be that as it may, as Wieviorka (2014: 637) has suggested, the idea of integration has today become more or less synonymous with the question of whether or not immigrants will ‘disrupt’ Western societies. This is backed up by a recent study in the UK which shows that although the various communities that make up British society share many common values, integration is nevertheless portrayed as an ‘immigrant problem’, with no clear definition of integration provided by the government (Lessard-Phillips and Galandini 2015). It should also be noted that the dominant discourse of integration has in recent years disproportionately addressed, indeed problematized, working-class and non-white immigrants, as well as Britain’s Muslim populations irrespective of the length of their settlement.<sup>1</sup> The problematization of Muslims (or those perceived as Muslims) has further taken place through the introduction of the notion of ‘British values’, which Muslims are generally thought to lack (Jarvis et al. 2017; see also Kundnani 2007). That is also why questions of integration and British citizenship have become so tightly entwined with issues of (Muslim) religious and (Western) secular identity.

This fraught context frames the salient debates around integration, Britishness and citizenship. In August 2017, for example, an All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) chaired by Labour MP Chuka Umunna published a report that repeated the need to better integrate the UK’s migrant populations (APPG 2017). This time, however, there was an acknowledgement that post-Brexit demonization of migrants is acting as a barrier to integration, a rather rare divergence from the usual rhetoric of blaming immigrant communities for ‘failing to integrate’. A key theme in the APPG’s approach to integration is the idea of British citizenship, which is reframed as way for immigrants to demonstrate belonging to Britain. The APPG also uses the notion of ‘pathways to citizenship’ to effectively position all immigrants as citizens-in-waiting. This approach rests on the assumption that the pathway to citizenship is a smooth one and that British citizenship is desirable, perhaps even necessary, in becoming integrated. It also assumes that the difficult questions around the recognition of minority cultures versus assimilation have been definitively answered.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/parsons-green-radicalisation-british-muslims-austerity-middle-east-a7957766.html> (accessed 30/07/2018)

What the current debate fails to appreciate, however, is the complexity and multi-dimensionality of integration as a definite set of social and political practices with wide-reaching powers. Particularly, little attention has been paid to its cultural dimensions, as well as the fact that dominant policies and discourses operate differently within different immigrant communities. We argue here that there are multiple and competing discourses, pragmatics and cultures of integration within a given immigrant (or ethnic minority) community. These intersect in important ways with diasporic dynamics of class, religiosity and secularity and have implications for processes of identity formation/assertion as well as social, political and religious/secular practice. By the same token we also draw attention to the ways in which dominant British integration policies and debates – well-intentioned though they may be – can *transform* immigrant communities by privileging some identities and modes of belonging over others. Paradoxically, in some cases the de-privileged identities are ones already protected under the UK's Equality Act 2010, such as religious identities.

Drawing on recent research data from the UK Iranian diaspora, this paper aims to complicate the debate by exploring the cultural dimensions of integration at the intra-diasporic level. Among many UK Iranians, particularly secular middle-class professionals, integration increasingly acts as an idiom for being a 'good', 'successful', 'proper' Iranian, and a failure to integrate is seen as unacceptable and even shameful. As we will see, the impetus for integration among these Iranians derives from what can be described as a sense of inferiority steeped in a Eurocentric mentality which exerts huge pressure on Iranians to 'do better' in cultural and economic terms and to constantly justify their adequacy and presence in the UK. Among some Iranians, there is a strong narrative that successful integration can only happen by adopting a particular lifestyle – one which emphasises neo-liberal ideals of success and power through education and consumerism – thus explicitly or implicitly reinforcing the perceived superiority of Western civilization and the inferiority of Iranian Islamic culture. An important outcome of these processes is the sense of Iranian integration being *sui generis*, producing a weakness of 'solidarity' with other minority groups in a socially-progressive politics. Another outcome is the increasing marginalization in popular diasporic Iranian culture and social relations of Shia

identities and practices.<sup>2</sup> We focus here mostly on the latter. However, we also draw some comparisons with the US to suggest how the UK situation might change in the near future.

### **‘Integration’ among UK Iranians**

It is difficult to have any sort of understanding of Iranian diasporic living without first understanding the role and impact of Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution. The particular events, discourses and currents of the revolution, their histories and subsequent developments, have all played a crucial role in defining Iranians’ migratory, settlement and integration practices across the world. Arguably, no factor was more central during the revolution than Shiism, which proved highly effective in unifying and mobilizing against the Shah what were otherwise disparate revolutionary forces (Keddie 2003). For around half a century leading up to the revolution, Iran had been steadily undergoing a systematic and sometimes violent regime of secularization and Westernization. It had also witnessed high levels of social inequality and political authoritarianism. These all but guaranteed the potency and popular appeal of Shiism as not only a religious but also a socio-political force. It was therefore espoused by Iranians from an array of social and political backgrounds including some secular intellectuals. A popular analysis of Iran’s cultural diminution was provided in Al-Ahmad’s (1962/1984) argument about ‘Westoxification’ or ‘Occidentosis’ (*gharbzadegi*), which has remained a trope in contemporary Iranian discourses under the Islamic Republic. However, as the post-revolutionary dynamics took a decidedly Islamic turn and established an Islamic theocracy in place of the monarchy, many previously supportive parties, factions and individuals turned once again into oppositional voices. A discourse and political agency began to develop, contributed to by royalists among other groups, that expressed nostalgia for the Shah’s secular Iran, including his favoured tropes of ancient Persia and its imperial might. As such, since the revolution, the event which also precipitated the largest exodus in Iran’s history, Shiism has been at the very core of the contested notions of Iranian identity, culture, social organization and politics (see Milani 2018; Gholami 2015). What might be described as an Iranian ‘third way’ between repressive monarchy and

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<sup>2</sup> Due to space limitations, the article will not focus on the particularities of devout Iranian Shia identities and practices.

repressive theocracy - a more democratic, secular and progressive orientation – was quashed before and after the revolution, although it limps on both inside Iran and in diaspora.<sup>3</sup>

It is perhaps not surprising given this history that the Iranian diaspora is widely acknowledged to be a predominantly secular one, especially in the US and the UK (Gholami 2015; Spellman 2004).<sup>4</sup> However, this secularism is often of a particular kind – it has unique characteristics. In his research on Iranian diasporic secularism, Gholami has shown that it takes particular issue with Islam, implicitly and explicitly problematizing, marginalizing and ridiculing ‘the Islamic’. He has called this modality of the secular ‘non-Islamiosity’ (Gholami 2015). In its more extreme guise, non-Islamiosity, which works across classes and generations and has come to be practised by later immigrants as well, aims to purge what it sees as a pure Iranian/Persian identity, culture and language from Islamic influences. This is often done through a glorification of Iran’s pre-Islamic history, especially the Persian empire (sixth century BCE – seventh century CE). The iconography of Zoroastrianism as a ground for an ancient Iranian identity has also gained some popular traction, although practising adherents inside Iran have had a difficult time. At the level of everyday living, for many diasporic Iranians the various levels of non-Islamiosity constitute a mechanism of self-making that allows them to carve out specific social and experiential spaces in which certain modalities of selfhood – those believed to have been curtailed by Islam – can be (re)constructed and lived. In this way, non-Islamiosity is individually and socially transformative, shaping discourses and sensibilities. As such, it also has a considerable impact on Shia religious practices, identities and experiences. Thus, devout Shia experience and practice is often shaped in a dialogic relationship with non-Islamiosity (Gholami 2015). That is, Iranian diasporic Shiism cannot be understood or studied without reference to non-Islamiosity as a diasporic secular mode of power.

To add to this complexity is the re-emergence of Sunni-Shia antagonisms at the international level, most evidently framed by the competition for regional hegemony between Saudi Arabia (an extreme manifestation of Wahhabi Sunnism) and Shia Iran. In Britain, the distinction between different branches of Islam is poorly understood and even less apparent in public discourses about Islam; any differentiation mainly develops in parallel with international issues

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<sup>3</sup> Although its political composition and aims were very complex, the Green Movement of 2009 can be seen as an example of this.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that there are also Iranian Jews, Christians and Bahais, though research on them is scarce.

such as the conflict in Syria. But Shiis are in the minority within British Islam. An on-line guide suggests that ‘at least 96% of Muslims in Britain, and approximately 1520 or 96% of masjids or mosques, are Sunni, and about 2% are Shi’a, with 67 masjids.’ (MuslimsInBritain.org). The recent controversy about the re-development of Golders Green Hippodrome in north-west London into a Muslim cultural centre seems to be oblivious of the fact that this will be Shia. What is more, Iranians tend to keep to themselves even within the Shia minority. For instance, the London Shia Muslims Hub<sup>5</sup> is predominantly South Asian in ethnicity, with no sign of Iranian participation. Furthermore, neither ‘Iranian’ nor ‘Shia’ are categories in the UK census nor used officially by the UK government.

The Iranian diasporic culture of integration that is the focus of this paper must, first of all, be seen within the historical, migratory and UK contexts briefly sketched out above (see also Sreberny and Gholami in press). This means that the particularities of the revolution, Shiism, secularism, the UK context and their continued instrumentality in shaping Iranian living at every level must be accounted for. Secondly, the influence of Western cultures and trends cannot be underestimated: the glorification of pre-Islamic Persia that so readily animates dominant secular discourses among diasporic Iranians does not only happen through a problematization and exclusion of Iran’s Islamic history; it is also intimately entwined with certain understandings of Western attitudes and cultures, as we show below. In the UK setting, the particularities of the Conservative Party’s austerity economics and the rhetorics of new entrepreneurialism are key. The professionalized discourse of ‘success’, with its emphasis on high educational and professional achievements, individual wealth and neo-liberal consumerism – and having access to political power through these – stand out. In sum, we argue based on our data (see below) that among UK Iranians the idea of integration is dominated by secular middle-class discourses and is articulated in a way which:

- i. ties integration unproblematically to neo-liberalized modes of educational, economic and political activity;
- ii. makes it unacceptable for Iranians not to integrate *on those terms*;

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<sup>5</sup> A meet-up located at <http://bit.ly/2y6qFUX> (accessed 10/10/2017)

- iii. generally accepts British socio-political structures as given, even righteous, and does not problematize or critique them, thus also absolving the British government of any responsibility towards its minority populations;
- iv. implicitly and explicitly problematizes and excludes Islam/Shiism while seeing it as an obstacle for Iranian success;
- v. obscures any possible solidarity with other Shia groups and other UK Muslims;
- vi. obscures any possible solidarity with non-white minorities in general.

### **Our research project and findings**

Below, we will examine how these issues play out institutionally. However, let us first illustrate the above arguments through interview data collected in London between 2014-2015 as part of a mixed-methods research project funded by the British Council.<sup>6</sup> In total, 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with UK-based Iranians, 13 males and 17 females aged between 22-60+. The interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed; we have discussed other major interview themes elsewhere (see Sreberny and Gholami 2016). The interviewees were secular middle-class professionals and were recruited through purposive snowball sampling. They were also all either British citizens or permanent residents of the UK. We asked them about their views on and modes of participation in ‘Iranian communities’ in Britain, as well as wider issues of belonging and integration.<sup>7</sup> Quite often, there was a self-deprecating sort of sensibility that seems to be largely structured by, and reproductive of, the discourse and logic of integration discussed above.

We first became interested in the issue of integration when one of our interviewees (male, 31-45) described what he saw as his mother’s failure to integrate as ‘tragic and shameful’ because after 30 years in Britain she still wore a headscarf and did not speak English ‘properly’. Such severely negative language is indicative of the pressure some middle-class Iranians feel to distance themselves and their familial and social circles from dominant images of Muslims and the Middle East and make themselves more acceptable to British culture. Integration, then, is primarily understood and approached in cultural terms. For our interviewee, integration was not mainly about one’s civic and economic contributions to British society such as voting, paying

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<sup>6</sup> The project was led by Professor Sreberny.

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see Sreberny and Gholami 2016.

taxes and upholding the law. He also seemed to disregard the UK's championing of multiculturalism, which includes allowing people to dress in accordance with their religious/cultural customs. Moreover, he accused his mother of not speaking English *properly*, which suggests that being integrated requires a specific level, and possibly style, of English. Again, this is not an explicit part of government or public-sector policy but is something that some overseas recruiters such as the National Health Service (NHS) or universities can determine based on their needs. The government does require some migrants to demonstrate *basic* English skills upon applying for a visa and to show that they have improved on those skills within a certain time period; there are also some language requirements for naturalizing as a British citizen, though there is an on-going political debate about whether to require and provide resources for immigrants' language competency. However, all these rules are relatively recent<sup>8</sup> and certainly do not require advanced levels of proficiency. We have here, then, a good example of how dominant discourse/policy takes on a life of its own within a migrant/diasporic community and lends itself to the production of new discourses, cultures and relations. That is, what may be simply intended as a set of policy statements/practices that wholly make sense in the majority culture produces a range of (unintended) pressures and dynamics within migrant communities.

A crucial point here is that migrants do not engage with each of the policies and discourses that address them separately. Rather, it is more accurate to think of a comprehensive, if complex, 'field' of policies and discourses that are a constant and powerful presence in their lives, *regardless* of length of settlement in the UK or citizenship status, exactly because the field is highly racialized and religified. In terms of the focus of this paper, although religious belief/practice is not officially highlighted as a barrier to integration but is in fact protected under UK law, it is nonetheless seen by many Iranians as a distinct marker of a failure to integrate. This is in no small part due to rising levels of Islamophobia in the West today, which is steadily gaining acceptance in mainstream debates as well. As such, the issue of Islam also affects Iranians' social relationships/networks as well as how they engage with their own community. Thus, for some people, ensuring that they are part of a secular social circle is paramount, not

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<sup>8</sup> For example, the 'improvement' requirement known as the A2 test took effect in 2017.

least for achieving integration and being seen to have integrated. According to another of our interviewees (male, 46-60):

There are beliefs that [some Iranians] carry with them over years and years and years even if there is no real root for it or real reason for it to be carried out. But people believe in that, it is more of a, yeah, superstitious idea. That's how religion is now in most of the Iranian people. And I still see families, women, men with those thoughts and because I don't believe in any of that I feel myself disconnected from that.

*Interviewer: Okay. And, like, this disconnect that you have with the Iranian community – does it not make your life isolated? Or do you have different means of connecting with Iranian people?*

I have different means because I have friends who think... who are on the same level of me, and they are Iranian and I have, uh, loads of Europeans friends, non-Iranians friends... So no, if I find somebody who is thinking the same way as me I can easily connect. So, um... it doesn't bother me. I don't feel a hole in my life, not being connected to the Iranian communities.

This man, then, would not establish a relationship with anyone who *still* holds Islamic beliefs, choosing instead to connect with people who are 'on his level'. In his cultural framework, therefore, connection to other Iranians or an Iranian community was not seen as very important. Rather, social relationships were driven primarily by compatibility of secular beliefs. This raises two important points. First, the idea that has gained purchase in some quarters of British politics since the publication of the Cantle Report in 2001<sup>9</sup> that (non-white, Muslim) migrant communities choose to segregate themselves from the rest of society is shown here to be inaccurate. In the case of middle-class Iranians, intra-communal links can be extremely weak as individuals seek relationships based on life-style or belief compatibility. Second, the emphasis that many Iranians place on secularity has a marginalizing effect on Iranian Shia identities. This

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<sup>9</sup> This report was commissioned by the UK government in response to so-called 'race riots' in some northern English towns, which Cantle blamed on the 'self-segregation' of ethnic minority communities. The report had a significant impact on UK policy and helped to usher in the 'community cohesion' agenda which saw sweeping changes in the UK's naturalization and citizenship processes.

is because secular discourse is not neutral towards religiosity but rather positions it negatively and actively seeks to exclude it, as we saw in the quote above.

The marginalization of Muslim/Shia identities happens alongside a valorization of the practices of the state and the majority population. As alluded to earlier, this often manifests in the idea that Iranians must not be a burden on Britain. Interviewees often expressed strong views about this and felt shame and embarrassment at the thought of potentially bothering their ‘hosts’. Concomitantly, they expect all Iranians, even those born in Britain, to be continually grateful to Britain and recognise its magnanimity. This might involve taking blame even when there is no evidence that one has done anything wrong. As one woman put it:

Our community and cultural celebrations such as Nowrooz, Sizdebedar and Chaharshanbe Soori all seem to have a significant amount of police present. This is incredibly embarrassing. Why don't they allow us to have barbeques on days like this? I believe this is partly our fault, as we may have given off a bad image and come across as violent. I don't think this is true, but a few fights here and there have led the police to believe this. I believe that we should help ourselves. The government here is fair and they do not owe us anything! (Female, 46-60)

There is in the quote above almost a temptation to criticise the misrepresentation of Iranians as violent and to register a complaint that barbeques are not allowed. However, the interviewee quickly changes direction and reluctantly holds Iranians responsible for giving off a negative image. As with the previous viewpoints, the theme of embarrassment is also present here, especially as the cultural celebrations cited – because they are pre-Islamic celebrations and take place in open public spaces – are seen by many Iranians as an opportunity to ‘showcase’ the compatibility and comparability of Iranian and British cultures.

It is also noteworthy that this respondent described the state as fair and stopped short of making any demands for special consideration, even as British governments have been known to grant special dispensation to accommodate some minority groups (e.g. exempting Sikhs from wearing safety helmets at work). Importantly, this relates to the fact that middle-class Iranians often do not want to be seen to be so different as to require special dispensation. Many are quite happy to

assimilate fully to the dominant culture, which helps to further marginalize and problematize Shia religious and/or cultural identities and practices.

However, some Iranians approach the issue of integration more pragmatically, with many recognizing that being integrated, or being seen to have integrated, is useful for achieving financial and professional success. As a PhD student at a respected UK university said: ‘By integrating yourself to the system and not seeing yourself as an outsider you can open the door for success.’ In this context, not seeing oneself as an outsider is about more than self-perception; it is about ensuring that there is plenty of distance between one’s identity/image as an integrated Iranian and the negative images associated with non-white, especially Muslim, migrants as well as with the current Iranian regime.

However, the same person said:

I’d like to one day obtain my British passport in order to live here indefinitely, however I’ll still call myself an Iranian with a British passport. Let’s put it this way, if I was from one of the EU countries, I wouldn’t apply for a British passport, though I would choose to stay in Britain and not my country of origin. So the only reason to have a British passport for me is due to the fact that my own Iranian passport is very weak and not only here but unfortunately globally, at this stage one of the weakest passports to hold. (Female, 31-45)

Interestingly, then, despite seeing integration as important for success, becoming a British citizen was not seen as a necessary step towards integration. The ability to vote, for example, was not a priority for this interviewee. Rather, integration referred to a particular set of cultural and economic behaviours that are meant to guarantee economic success and social acceptance. Yet, even such a pragmatic approach is in part driven by the emphasis in dominant discourse and policy that ‘good migrants’ are economically useful and make an effort not to be too culturally alien. That said, this conception of integration is markedly different than the one espoused by the APPG, as described above in the introduction.

### **Institutional Marginalization**

There is evidence that the marginalization of Shia identities is also happening institutionally in the Iranian diaspora. For example, in mainstream Iranian supplementary schools in the UK, the

Islamic aspects of Iranian history and culture are generally not focussed upon in the curriculum. The emphasis is much more on ‘doing well’ and being successful in British society by achieving good grades. The tacit understanding seems to be that Islamic culture offers little utility and cultural capital.<sup>10</sup>

The same is true of some community organisations that purport to represent UK Iranians. Take for example BICDO Youth, all the more interesting because it directly addresses young British-Iranians. Its parent organisation, the British Iranian Community Development Organisation (BICDO), has ambitions of being the primary voice of UK Iranians, a sort of go-between representing and empowering ‘Iranians’ in ‘British society’, including in Britain’s ‘corridors of power’.<sup>11</sup> We have put ‘Iranian’ and ‘British society’ in inverted commas because BICDO defines them in quite exclusive ways in line with the context outlined above. This also means that ‘development’, a key word in the organisation’s name, comes to denote something very particular.

The landing page of BICDO Youth’s website shows the organization’s logo followed by the strap line: ‘One Identity. One Community. One Future,’ written in large letters across the top of the page. Apart from anything else, this contrasts strongly with the picture painted of a fragmented and internally diverse ‘community’, divided by religion (including Bahai, Jews and Armenians), political affiliations, age and class, as noted by many participants in our project (Authors, 2016). Below this is a rolling slideshow of photographs depicting ‘Iranian culture’, including a well-known image from Persepolis; needless to say there is nothing Islamic on the landing page. Browsing through the various pages of the site, one is repeatedly presented with messages, photos, videos and projects offering what the organization calls ‘an insight into Iranian culture’. Cultural practices such as ‘charshanbeh souri’,<sup>12</sup> tying Iran’s contemporary popular culture to its pre-Islamic past, have short films dedicated to them along with other aspects of mass culture like *lavashak*, a fruit roll snack. Again, as with the landing page, Iran’s Islamic history and heritage are conspicuously absent. In fact, ‘Iranian culture’ seems to be represented exclusively through the pre-Islamic and distinctly non-Islamic aspects of

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<sup>10</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of Iranian supplementary schools, see Gholami 2017.

<sup>11</sup> BICDO’s mission statement can be found on its website (<http://www.bicdo.org/> or <https://www.facebook.com/BicdoYouth/> Accessed 18/11/2017). As part of our project we also interviewed several senior staff, including the Director, who expressed these aims.

<sup>12</sup> An annual fire festival anticipating Nowruz, the Iranian New Year.

contemporary life – this despite the fact that BICDO Youth describes as one of its key aims to ‘showcase our heritage in as many ways as possible’ and intends for its representation of Iranian culture to act as an ‘educational tool to try and *correct misconceptions* about Iran and its people’ (our emphasis).

In keeping with its commitment to carve out ‘one identity, one community, one future’ for UK Iranians, the website clearly aims to present a particular image of Iran and Iranians, one that is more palatable for Western audiences and compatible with their ideas of a non-threatening ‘exotic’ culture. Putting distance between Iranian-ness and Islam seems to be a crucial strategy for achieving that aim. By the same token, BICDO Youth also tries to show ‘the Iranian community’ (or the imminently uniting Iranian community) as one which is well-integrated, ambitious, dynamic and generally on the same economic and political wavelength as mainstream (arguably middle-class) Britain. As such, the organisation is at pains to show its members and collaborators engaged in important activities such as speaking at the Houses of Parliament and interacting with Members of Parliament. It also offers biographical information about its senior managers: young, stylish, high-achieving British-Iranians who have glittering futures ahead of them in finance, law and other high-prestige professions. In this way, we are also presented with the ideal image of British-Iranian youth whose task is to clear up ‘misconceptions’ about Iranians, make ‘us’ more popular and respectable, gain the community recognition and eventually exert influence at the highest echelons of British society.

It is clear that constructs such as ‘Iranian’, ‘British society’ and ‘development’ are being defined and invoked in quite distinctive and exclusive ways by BICDO Youth. As for ‘Iranian’, any Iranian person who does not possess or display the characteristics propounded by the organization is potentially guilty of peddling the kind of misconceptions BICO Youth are fighting. The organization thus makes it incumbent upon Iranians to be less ‘Muslim’ and instead to embrace the cultural, political and professional ethos of Britain. However, Britain itself is also defined very narrowly: the emphasis on high academic and professional achievement, especially as a way to secure wealth and power, is typically associated with middle-class attitudes, particularly those of a conservative political persuasion. As such, far from seeing Iranians as any sort of critical or progressive voice in Britain or sharing any concerns with other migrant populations, Muslim or otherwise, their integration becomes a way to bolster and reproduce the

dominant economic and political structures of Britain. As we will see below, this is tied to an underlying belief that as a foreign minority, Iranians must not do anything that may upset their hosts; they should in fact largely assimilate and then do as well as they can within the limits set by the host society. The idea of development, finally, gains meaning in this context. ‘Community development’ comes to refer to social, political, economic and cultural activities that emanate from and reproduce neo-liberal, secular, West-centric structures and discourses within diasporic Iranian settings. BICDO is effectively aiming to (re)create Iranians in the British Conservative Party’s dominant image.

It is important to bear in mind that organizations like BICDO see and advertise themselves as Iranian pure and simple – i.e. representing what is supposedly normally, universally Iranian. The authority to self-represent in this manner is derived in part from the belief that their highly secular position and identity make them easily compatible with mainstream British society and therefore make them well-integrated and acceptable. It also clearly differentiates them from other non-white and Muslim populations that are often problematized in debates about extremism and terrorism. In their efforts to show the community to be well-integrated, Iranian organizations are not placing any serious demands on the British government and wider society for special recognition. Religion is generally perceived as a minority affair that religious groups are responsible for and which does not and cannot affect the ‘mainstream’ Iranian community. In this way, the process of Shia marginalization/exclusion is also becoming an integral aspect of diasporic Iranian institutional behaviour.

### **A caveat about media representation**

The one area of British social life about which Iranians do voice considerable concern is the general media representation of Iranians. Overall, there is little understanding or representation in the media of the different interpretive communities within Islam. Indeed, British Muslims have had to work hard to not be seen as a single homogenous community. Over the past few years, the politics of the Middle East has triggered somewhat crude media discussions about the

Sunni-Shia divide, with suggestions that the latter are ‘winning’ in the region,<sup>13</sup> or presenting this as ‘Islam’s age-old schism.’<sup>14</sup>

Respondents in our study thought British news media images represented them as fanatical and removed from the modernized world. One young woman respondent expressed her concern thus:

I would say that the main challenge [for Iranians] is negative media coverage. Stereotypes, you know, things to do with nuclear weapons, how Iranian women are oppressed, how we’re fanatical Muslims who self-mutilate during Ashura, that we all chant ‘death to the West’, that kind of stuff. These stereotypes are most definitely not representative of the whole nation or our people. It’s just Western misconceptions and misinterpretations.

This repetitive coverage was seen to produce racist attitudes and stigma that challenged Iranians’ sense of being integrated. As another young woman complained, there is ‘an ongoing challenge for us Iranians in Britain in trying to educate or show others that not all Iranians are fanatical Islamists who hate Britain and America’. Many Iranians clearly feel hailed as Muslims and that they are included in the general exclusionary rhetoric that prevails. It is possibly the only issue where Iranians share and articulate similar concerns with other Muslim minority groups in Britain yet one where again Iranians appear to manifest a blindness to the wider Islamophobia that prevails in society and a lack of solidarity with other Muslims.

### **US parallels in the politicization of identities**

It is instructive to look, albeit briefly, at the Iranian experience in the US for the similarities and differences it highlights. There is by now a considerable public political debate in the US that parallels the issues we have been exploring in regards to Britain. We mentioned above that the most recent British census did not offer the possibility of recognizing a specific Iranian identity. Neither does the US census. However, in 2010 there was a vigorous campaign to encourage Iranian-Americans to indicate their race as ‘other’ – which is to say ‘non-white’ - and to write in an explicit identity as Iranian, Iranian-American or Middle Eastern. This represented a considerable shift from the first generation of Iranian-American migrants who did not wish to

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<sup>13</sup> See for example: <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/the-shiites-are-winning-in-the-middle-east-and-its-all-thanks-to-russia-a7197081.html> (accessed 30/07/2018)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16047709> (accessed 30/07/2018)

claim any difference from majority white America, much like the UK Iranians whom we have described. This could be in response to an increase in anti-Iranian sentiments in wider American society: a recent US study has found that Iranians are acutely aware of these sentiments and experience them in their lives (see Paige et al. 2015). Moreover, Iranians are often singled out specifically in the US, possibly due to the historically fraught relationship between Iran and America (ibid). Although this is not the case in the UK, Iranians' objective and perceived stigmatization is an important parallel.

There are other issues worth considering in this regard. Tehranian's analysis of the phenomenon of 'whitewashing' Middle Eastern minorities in the US suggests that this orientation might have been beneficial in the short term but it also left Middle Eastern Americans 'at the margins of the civil rights movement and with little collective social or political force' (2009: 184), and he suggests that there is a new politics afoot. Alinejad, similarly, mentions that the second-generation Iranian-Americans she encountered 'stake personal claims to an anti-racist non-whiteness defined by the multiple racisms they observe and encounter' (2010: 137), even if this is often a 'post-political' stance. In a similar vein, the sociologist Neda Maghbouleh's (2017) exploration of the identities of young Iranian-Americans reveals the 'limits of whiteness', as she puts it. This immigrant group hovers on the cusp of racial invisibility as defined by law and their everyday hyper-visibility. While the US context - and the nature of debates about race - differs significantly from the British one, the UK's Prevent<sup>15</sup> policy echoes some of the 'extreme vetting' procedures of the US and the rhetoric of English far-Right extremists such as Tommy Robinson focuses exclusively on the 'Islamic threat' engulfing Britain. Hence it is indeed possible that young Iranians in Britain will also start to rethink their position vis-a-vis other ethnic minority groups and feel less resolutely part of the white mainstream than before. Institutionally, too these US-based experiences suggest that in the longer term, the simple aim for recognition by the likes of BICDO might be more successful when aligned with other minorities in Britain than by an isolationist Iranian position.

Yet, at the same time, an (re-)emerging rhetoric around Iranians as 'Aryan', originally blond and blue-eyed, a crudely racist position, is being revived by people like Jason Reza Jorjani of the Alt-

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<sup>15</sup> The key strand of the UK government's counter-extremism policy, CONTEST. For research on the Islamophobic nature of this policy, see *inter alia* Novelli 2017; Open Society 2016; MCB 2015.

Right<sup>16</sup> and Reza Aslan, both public figures in the US. This has, for the moment, been mainly conducted in English (not Persian), suggesting that context, both social and political, is key to such dynamics and debates about identity. The emerging politics around Iranian-American identity has been directly addressed by a group of US-based Iranian feminist scholars, who argued in 2017 that:

We aim to recognize that while Iranian-Americans have much more work to do to make themselves allies and co-conspirators with other people of color, especially to black people — in their home countries and in the diaspora — we also recognize that most Iranian-Americans know that their lived experiences do not align with the European-descended counterparts Spencer et al. claim as their ancestors, and that constructions of race and uses of racism fuel the brutal power structures and institutions that serve to exploit people of color, Iranians included. We believe that those of us with access to institutions of higher education and other forms of privilege that come from access to education have a duty to directly confront expressions and beliefs in, and collusion with, white supremacy.<sup>17</sup>

In general, it might be said that the rhetoric of identity politics is more inflamed across the Atlantic. Yet the shift in the US by Iranians from a more ‘integrationist’ position – that clearly echoes the BICDO rhetoric – to a more politically nuanced understanding of the dynamics of racism and power gives us pause to wonder if something similar might emerge in the UK. Such a shift might occur as UK Iranians grow increasingly impatient with being misrepresented in public discourse despite their best efforts to fit in, and possibly also because of diasporic interactions with US Iranians through media and social networks. Importantly, it might also lead to the likes of BICDO and the secular middle-class generally to reflect more critically upon their marginalization of Iranian Shias. The US case indicates both the complexity but also changing nature of Iranian identifications in the on-going racialization of religious and ethnic groups. We might expect a similar discussion to become more pronounced in regard to Iranians in Britain over the next decade. Thus, while census data and inclusion in statistical evidence might be useful in and of itself, such discussions underscore a far more profound concern about the nature and extent of Iranian integration in both the US and in Britain. More comparative research would help tease out these debates further.

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<sup>16</sup> See for example: <https://redice.tv/red-ice-radio/the-iranian-renaissance-and-aryan-imperium> (accessed 20/12/17)

<sup>17</sup> Quoted from: <http://www.chronicle.com/blogs/letters/notions-of-aryan-iranianness-must-be-rejected/> (accessed 21/12/17)

## **Concluding remarks**

Of course, there are many Iranian diasporans who practice Shia Islam to varying degrees of piety and participate in a range of social, cultural and political activities directly tied to their religiosity. Furthermore, Iranian diasporic Shiism, and indeed the Iranian diaspora itself, must be viewed in the context of emerging political and ethno-religious alliances that make it difficult to sharply distinguish between secular/religious, Iranian/non-Iranian, local/global positions – one example being the ‘Don’t Attack Iran’ campaign of the Stop the War Coalition that brought together activists from a range of backgrounds. That said, the theme of Shia marginalization by secular, middle-class discourses and practices is a powerful one that animates Iranian diasporic social relations to a considerable degree. In this context, as we have argued, the ways in which the idea of integration works at various levels warrants special attention. We have been concerned here with Britain’s policies and politics of integration, which we have argued must be implicated for their role in creating a specific culture of integration among UK Iranians. This is a culture that equates integration with a neo-liberal, West-centric understanding of success while devaluing Shia cultures and identities, and Islam in general. Awareness of these processes becomes all the more important when very often, as we saw above, Iranians blame themselves for failing to live up to the standards of integration, without making any demands on the state – in fact they usually see the state as righteous and defend its actions.

Related to this, regardless of their stated aims and intentions, dominant policies and discourses of integration take on a new life as a result of interacting with minority populations. That is, they are taken up and deployed in different ways according to the specific dynamics of a given community. They thus produce unintended social and cultural effects. Among middle-class Iranians, as we have seen, ‘integration’ is approached primarily in cultural terms and inextricably linked with the wide acceptance of Western middle-class logics on the one hand and the marginalization of Islam in favour of pre-Islamic Persia on the other. As such, the imperative to integrate, which on the face of it is benign and in keeping with national policy, in reality ends up marginalizing Iranian Shias. Ultimately, there are many possible routes to integration, and it is therefore quite problematic that some Iranian organizations, such as BICDO, as the self-appointed voice of all Iranians, choose a very class-biased and self-denying position rather than

one of solidarity with other minority groups. However, we also presented evidence from the US that suggests dynamics in this regard could be about to change.

In sum, we have been concerned to underscore the fact that immigrants and ethnic minorities experience the state's discourses and policies of integration not in isolation and not in a straightforward manner; they experience them as a complex and historically-cumulative field of policy that constantly addresses them, even as some, such as secular Iranians, are wilfully ignored. Thus, usage of terms like 'multiculturalism' or 'pathways to citizenship' must be adequately problematized. When Meer and Modood (2014: 667), for example, argue that British multiculturalism has historically rejected 'assimilation' and led to the positive recognition of minorities, they do not sufficiently appreciate the lived daily challenges that migrants/minorities face as a result of being the object of multiculturalist policies; being constantly interpellated and transformed by them; having to live up to or negotiate them. Therefore, in spite of what the government and some academics say, in settings such as the Iranian one assimilationist and marginalizing tendencies continue to be extremely strong and shape cultural and social relations, all in the name of integration.

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