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Niosha Nafei is a mother of three and former beauty pageant winner who teaches Persian dance. Her dance academy raises money for cancer research. Chronicle photo by Lance Iversen

OUT OF IRAN

Five extraordinary Iranian Americans love both countries but loathe their leaders' war talk

Bob Cooper

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No one reads the headlines about the U. S.-Iran imbroglio -- which swings wildly between threats of war and flirtations with diplomacy -- more closely than Iranian Americans, who number 50,000 in the Bay Area. For them, Iran is not part of the "axis of evil," it's where a grandmother, brother or favorite cousin lives.

Most arrived here with the late-1970s diaspora, escaping the tyranny of the Ayatollah Khomeini only to face harassment by Americans who blamed them for the 444-day hostage crisis. Years later they were caught in the post-9/11 net of suspicion and scrutiny against all Middle Easterners, despite no hint of a connection between Iran and the tragedy.

Long ago, many began calling themselves Persians, the historical term, to avoid negative associations with Iran, but they still have an affinity for their birth country. Most are citizens of the United States, their adopted country, and a disproportionately high number are successful professionals.

The five Iranian Americans profiled here have taken steps to create a better future for Iranians in both countries. Saied Pourabdollah is a San Jose architect who was imprisoned and tortured in Iran; he now works for human rights there. Banafsheh Akhlaghi is a San Francisco attorney who defends the rights of Iranians persecuted in the United States. Omid Kordestani, a key player in Google's success, co-founded a foundation that promotes Iranian culture. Niosha Nafei is a former Miss Iran whose dance academy teaches Persian dance to a generation of girls who are thoroughly American. Ahsha Safai, who's worked for Bill Clinton and Gavin Newsom, encourages Iranian Americans to pursue political power as a guard against discrimination.

Against the backdrop of U.S. naval maneuvers in the Persian Gulf, U.S. charges that Iran is behind the arming and training of Iraqi insurgents, spinning centrifuges in Iran and menacing speeches from both nations' presidents, Iranian Americans who dare to visit family in Iran risk detainment in both countries -- by Iranian authorities who suspect them of being spies and U.S. Homeland Security officials who see them as possible terrorists. So most of them stay put, one eye on the news, while trying to live their lives without fear.

The Architect/Activist

Saied Pourabdollah

There is nothing unusual about the houses designed by 51-year-old San Jose architect Saied Pourabdollah. Nor is his belief in the Golden Rule uncommon. "Men and women, Shia and Sunni, Christians and Jews, should all have the same rights," he says. What sets him apart is that he knows how cruel those in power can be when such rights are stripped away.

At 17, he was arrested, tortured for three months, then imprisoned for two years by Iran's secret police for owning a Marxist novel -- "Mother," the literary classic by Maxim Gorky. "They hung me by the hands and genitals until I passed out," he says. "Just for reading a book. They singled out intellectuals because they were afraid what thinking might lead to."

The Shah of Iran was in power at the time and his secret police treated political prisoners as ruthlessly as Khomeini's later did. "Most of the 200 political prisoners in jail with me were dead within 10 years," he says. "If the shah didn't execute them, Khomeini did." After Pourabdollah's release, he joined student groups that pushed for the democracy that Khomeini promised before coming to power. But it was a false promise, and once more Pourabdollah was a wanted man. "I hid in friends' homes, but I knew they would find me because my name was in the newspapers." At 25, he and his wife, Farideh, made it to the United States through Pakistan and Spain.

The couple, who have two grown children, live in a small, brightly painted 1903 home in San Jose's lively Japantown district. The Bay Area has many similarities to the Shiraz region, where he grew up. Shiraz is an ancient capital of Persia known for producing great poets and wine. Like San Francisco, Shiraz is often called the City of Love, and like the Napa Valley, it is famous for its wine. The Shiraz (Syrah) varietal originated there and it's still enjoyed by Iranians behind closed curtains.

Pourabdollah's face saddens when he speaks of friends who were executed, but he channels his anguish into volunteer work for Iranians for Human Rights, which he co-founded seven years ago as Iranians for Democracy. The group organizes Bay Area demonstrations, hosts speakers and informs Iran human rights activists through Web sites and TV broadcasts -- received by many Iranians who have illegal satellite dishes hidden in their backyards. "Their labor and women's movements are strong," he says. "There's a nonviolent revolution going on, so we try to give them moral support."

It isn't easy, as reformists are routinely arrested. "Changes are happening, but they have to be made by Iranians inside the country, not by U.S. bombs or warships," he says. As for the only Iranian most Americans see on the news: "[Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad is no more like most Iranians than George W. Bush is like most Americans. They both benefit from barking at each other because that keeps the attention focused on having an enemy instead of domestic problems."

Despite having two brothers who remain in Iran, he says, "I have no desire to go back."

The Human Rights Lawyer

Banafsheh Akhlaghi

Iranian-born human rights lawyer Banafsheh Akhlaghi, 38, emerges from her office in San Francisco's Potrero Hill district wearing a rare smile. "It's a good day," she says. "A client was just released." She explains that he's an Iranian American accused of violating the U.S. embargo on transporting technology to Iran. "He spent six weeks in custody and missed the birth of his child. Now it appears the charge has been dropped. This is the kind of thing I have to deal with all the time."

All the time, that is, for the past six years. Until then she had breezed straight from law school (Cambridge University and Tulane) to a constitutional law professorship at JFK University in the East Bay. She had no immediate plans to practice law. But a few weeks after 9/11, she agreed to represent the Jordanian friend of a former student. FBI agents had twice interrogated him at his Sacramento County technology firm in Folsom and had demanded a third meeting, so this time she accompanied him. "The first two things they said were, 'If you're innocent, why did you bring an attorney?' and 'What are you hiding?' " She wrote a letter and the FBI backed off.

Her phone has been ringing ever since. "People's lives were being turned upside down, so I took their cases and gave up my teaching job, but I always assumed the fear stirred up by 9/11 would settle down and I could go back to my old life. But it hasn't happened. I now believe this is a systemic problem that could take generations to fix."

Akhlaghi took only pro bono and sliding-scale clients and soon used up her savings, so she founded the nonprofit National Legal Sanctuary for Community Advancement, which subsists on foundation grants and the assistance of a few volunteers and student interns. It's loosely modeled after the NAACP, with a mission to protect the rights of Middle Easterners, Muslims and South Asians through legal defense work, coalition and community building, and public and policy advocacy. "This is the next chapter of the civil rights movement," she says.

Her clients are increasingly fellow Iranian Americans. "The focus was Afghanis and Iraqis after those countries were invaded," she says, "but then it turned to Iranians when the speeches against Iran heated up." Her courtroom adversaries are frequently FBI, CIA and Homeland Security lawyers.

Polished and articulate, Akhlaghi has also slipped comfortably into the role of media advocate for Middle Easterners. She is a frequent guest on CNN and NPR, and has twice testified on Capitol Hill in opposition to the Patriot Act and National Security Entry-Exit Registration System -- which attempted to fingerprint, photograph and question all adult male visa holders from 24 predominantly Muslim countries. Thousands were deported or shuttled around the country to detention centers. "I had clients who were forced to sleep on concrete and deprived of food for days," she says. "The only charge against them was that they overstayed their visas. These were good people with jobs and families." The outrage in her voice is palpable.

Akhlaghi seems an unlikely champion for Middle Easterners. Her family moved to Los Angeles from Iran when she was 5, and the closest she's been since was on 2004 and 2005 trips to Jordan, where she taught Iraq's female parliamentarians about human and women's rights for the U.N.

Development Fund for Women.

Despite the Bay Area's liberal climate, she says that local Iranians are not immune from U.S. government intrusion. "Graduate students are routinely pulled out of classrooms at Berkeley to be interrogated and San Jose engineers are threatened with deportation. This community has become terrified of its own government. I truly believe that if another 9/11 happens, Middle Easterners and Muslims will be rounded up just like Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor -- and I would be one of them."

The Executive

Omid Kordestani

More than 40,000 links appear when you Google "Omid Kordestani" -- and he's a big reason why the word Google is so ubiquitous that it has become a verb. When he was hired in 1999 as Google's 12th employee (there are now more than 12,000), his job as Google's "business founder" was to make money for the young company -- not an easy mission for a search engine committed to carrying no home-page advertising. But by forging partnerships with companies like Netscape, Yahoo, eBay and AOL, Kordestani eventually boosted its revenues to a record \$10.6 billion in 2006. He is one of several Iranian Americans who have made it big in Silicon Valley, along with eBay founder Pierre Omidyar and former Yahoo Chief Technology Officer Farzad Nazem.

"I've never gone back to Iran because I've just been too busy," he explains at Google's Mountain View campus. "If I visited family I would want to stay awhile, plus the memories of my father would be depressing." It was after the death of his father from cancer in 1976 that his mother decided to move with Omid and his younger brother from Tehran to San Jose. They were nearly high school age and she wanted a better education for them.

"Fortunately I attended a Catholic school where English was taught every day, so adjusting to school here wasn't that hard," he recalls. He attended Buchser (now Santa Clara) High School and San Jose State -- where he gave the 2007 commencement address -- before earning a Master's in Business Administration at Stanford. "There's a huge focus on education by Iranian parents [Iranian-Americans nationally are five times more likely than other Americans to hold a doctorate] and my mother was no exception. She worked hard as a nurse so that I could concentrate on school." After graduating, he worked at Hewlett-Packard and two failed startups before becoming vice president of business development and sales for Netscape and then Google.

Kordestani, 43, knows his success is as much a product of luck as diligence. The family left Iran the year before Khomeini seized power, so instead of theocrats, he had to deal only with the taunts of a few lunkheads at his San Jose school during the Iran hostage crisis. "Iranian kids at other schools got in fights, but I dealt with it by trying to educate them. I told them, 'Did you know the Iranian government [before the shah] was overthrown by the CIA?' "

His extended family is scattered throughout the United States, Germany, Japan and Australia, with

only a few still in Iran, but he hasn't abandoned his roots. He co-founded the PARSA Community Foundation, which seeks to advance Iranian culture, education and leadership worldwide. His Iranian wife, Bita Daryabari, established her own nonprofit, the Unique Zan Foundation, which promotes women's health and education in the Middle East.

Kordestani is pinning his hopes on America's and Iran's leaders mending fences, and not only so that Google can gain better access to Iran's vast consumer base. "After 9/11, the whole region was painted with the same brush," he says. "Americans need to understand that Iran is not an Arabic country and Iran is not Iraq."

The father of two is optimistic about the future. "There are so many educated young people in Iran taking part in the global revolution in information," he says, briefly lapsing into Google-speak, "and information is power." He says that although some Web sites are blocked by Iran's government, the Internet traffic in Tehran is as heavy as the street traffic. If you don't believe him, Google it.

The Dance Teacher

Niosha Nafei

While in her late teens, Niosha Nafei taught Persian dance 16 hours a week in the living room of her uncle's Tehran home. She was always on edge. "I worried there would be a knock on the door and I would be taken to jail. Dancing was one of the worst things you could do in the eyes of Khomeini's government. It was pure evil."

It wasn't the first time she was scared. At 15, she was walking her brother home from the first grade someone when in a passing car splashed acid on her. She covered her face in time to avoid permanent disfigurement, but the burn marks are still visible on her left arm. This was apparently a punishment for her father teaching English to the children of foreign ambassadors; the Islamic fundamentalists had just seized power. "That's when my family knew it was time to leave, although I couldn't make it out until I was 20."

Nothing could stop Nafei from teaching and performing dance, and likewise, her scars didn't stop her from winning the 1992 Miss Iran pageant -- held in Los Angeles because Iran's mullahs frowned on beauty pageants even more than they did on dancing. She then graduated from UC Santa Cruz, married fellow Iranian Fardad Jay Jamali, a safety and environmental engineer, and founded the Niosha Dance Academy. "My mother still tells me I should have gone into engineering like my husband," she says with a laugh, "but dance is what I love."

Despite the physical and emotional scars she bore from Iran, she was upset by President Bush's 2002 "axis of evil" speech. "I accepted every invitation to perform that year, just to show Americans that we're a civilized people with a long tradition of dance and culture. Iran has much in common with America -- the modern high-rises, malls and freeways are no different than in the Bay Area."

Nafei, 36, teaches all the academy's 19 weekly classes in San Jose, San Mateo, Saratoga and San

Ramon. Students from 4 to 65 learn belly dancing, choreography and several forms of Persian dance. She performs with her students, who dress in lavish costumes, at Persian cultural events, weddings and an annual recital that draws audiences of up to 1,000. Persian dance shares the spotlight with cancer fundraising; academy dancers raise about \$20,000 each year for the American Cancer Society and a charity that sends medications to Iran to treat children with cancer.

Nafei was given a 40 percent chance to live when she was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in 2002. "I decided that if I recovered, I would make it my mission to fight cancer in the Persian community," she says. "So besides dance, I teach the kids life lessons like responsibility and generosity." The academy's slogan is "Dancers Fighting Cancer."

She lives in a spacious home in the rolling hills above Pleasanton with her husband and three sons, ages 8, 5 and 2. Her 2-year-old, Rameen, is her "miracle baby" because doctors told her the cancer treatments wouldn't allow her to have a third child. "Between the academy and the boys, I don't have time to be politically involved," she says. "But I know that Iran doesn't deserve to be bombed. The people are not the government. Iranians are a generous people: If you get a flat tire, five people pull over to help, and if you visit someone, your host stays home from work all week just to entertain you."

Nafei would like to return for a visit, but she's waiting for political tensions to ease. "I am an Iranian and a Muslim," she says, "even though I don't agree with the ruling imams' interpretation of the Quran." It's a small thing, but she has heard about one positive change in Iran. Dance classes, although only traditional dance in loose outfits, are now permitted.

The Public Servant

Ahsha Safai

"Iranian Americans have excelled in business, engineering and academia for decades," says Ahsha Safai between gulps of bottled water at a Mission District restaurant. "But there was always an aversion to politics. Unfortunately, it was ignored at our peril. When the Patriot Act, 'special registrations' and student-visa restrictions were legislated after 9/11, we didn't have a voice. It was a wakeup call."

Iranian Americans were wide awake by the time Safai put some in a room with Gavin Newsom in 2003. He organized the meeting as deputy director of field operations for Newsom's first mayoral campaign. "We had a good turnout of 150 and Gavin continues to meet with our community at least once a year," he says. "More and more of us are becoming politically active." He notes that Bay Area Iranian Americans have hosted fundraisers for Hillary Clinton, whom he met while working for a year in the Clinton White House.

Newsom and the Clintons are not the only political heavyweights on his resume. His Marin County wedding last summer to Boalt Hall law student Yadira Taylor -- they live in the Excelsior district -- was attended by his mentors at Northeastern, MIT and the White House: Michael Dukakis, the former Massachusetts governor, and Loretta Avent, President Clinton's deputy assistant of

intergovernmental affairs. Safai, 34, has in turn mentored several Iranian Americans in the three San Francisco mayor's office positions he's held.

Safai laughs when he calls himself a Texan Iranian, but it's true. His mother, Marsha McDonald, met Ahsha's father, Ata Safai, when they were college students in Texas, then moved with him to Tehran. They raised Ahsha there until he was 5, when his mother moved him to the safety of Cambridge, Mass., during the chaos of the shah's overthrow in 1979. His father still lives in Iran. "I went back two years ago to visit him," Safai says. "My old house was replaced by apartments, but it's still the big city I remembered."

Since arriving in San Francisco straight out of MIT, Safai has worked for Mayors Willie Brown and Newsom on a variety of projects: opening a teen center at the Sunnydale housing projects, pushing immigrant rights legislation through the Board of Supervisors, overseeing grants to revitalize the Fillmore district, and now hiring young, low-income city residents to clean up litter and graffiti in the city's busiest commercial corridors as a community programs liaison. None of it is glamorous work, but he says it's gratifying because the problems are readily fixable -- unlike, for example, U.S.-Iran relations.

"Americans have a distorted image of Iran," he says. "They know about the hostage crisis and Islamic fundamentalism, but do they know that Persia was the first country to codify human rights or that it has the largest Jewish community in the Middle East outside of Israel? They think of Iranians as terrorists, but none of the 9/11 terrorists were from Iran and there were candlelight vigils in Tehran the night after 9/11. As an Iranian American, I've had to live with the two governments being at odds since I can remember."

He sees hope, however, in the recent meetings over Iraq's future between U.S. and Iranian diplomats -- the first crack in the freeze between the nations in 27 years. "Any time there is dialogue, there's hope. Sometimes it's in times of crisis that the best opportunities arise for countries to heal old wounds. The U.S. and Iran need one another to create a stable environment in that part of the world. I truly hope they can."

Bob Cooper has written about Daniel Ellsberg, a snowshoe racer and outdoor weddings for the Chronicle Magazine.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/07/15/CMGLNQPM671.DTL>

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