Contemporary Mirror Imaging Between American and Iranian Citizens: An Exploratory Mixed-Methods Investigation of Mutual Perceptions and Misperceptions

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This exploratory mixed methods study examines the phenomenon of mirror imaging between American and Iranian citizens, whereby each group perceives the other through similar stereotypes, assumptions, and perceptions. Using both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques, the research investigates how historical, political, and cultural factors shape mutual perceptions and influence public opinion. The findings provide insights into the dynamics of cross-cultural understanding, intergroup relations, and the role of public narratives in shaping international attitudes. The study contributes to the fields of social psychology, international relations, and intercultural communication by highlighting factors that may either reinforce or reduce misperceptions between citizens of the two countries.

Keywords: Mirror Imaging, American Citizens, Iranian Citizens, Public Perception, Cross-Cultural Relations, International Relations

Introduction:

The relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States of America has been like a rollercoaster since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. Both countries, but particularly Iranians, have experienced both beneficial and negative outcomes as a result of this complex relationship. The way that Americans view Iranians has drastically changed, going from one extreme to the other. Such a significant change has been a potent indicator of Iranians' quality of life both inside and outside of Iran, as has the ongoing animosity between the two nations. The Iranian leadership considered the United States to be the "Great Satan" following the Iranian Revolution.

In a similar vein, the US government designated Iran as the primary adversary of Western nations, particularly the US. They have had a significant influence on the citizens of those nations, despite being primarily seen as political positions adopted by their respective administrations.

As a result, people's opinions of one another may be negatively impacted by this contentious discourse [1][2][3].

Iranians residing outside of Iran may be particularly impacted by such perceptions. Research indicates that attitudes and acceptance of immigrants in the host nation are among the most important aspects of cultural integration [4].

In the past, one of the most popular places for Iranians to move and settle has been the United States. For instance, Iranian immigration rose dramatically in the years following the Iranian revolution in 1979, and many Iranians now consider the United States to be their second home. It is believed that around 1.5 million Iranians, both immigrants and non-

immigrants, live in the United States. Over 11,000 Iranians residing in the US apply for permanent residency on average every year. Iranians made up 4463 of the 1,031,765 immigrants who filed for permanent status in 2019, according to the Department of Homeland Security's yearbook of immigration statistics [5]. It is also acknowledged that American universities are among the top choices for Iranian students. There were 12,783 Iranian undergraduate, graduate, non-degree, and optional program training (OPT) students enrolled in US universities as of the 2017–2018 academic year [6]. This study aims to investigate the impact (if any) of past and present events, such as the travel ban, on citizens of each country developing negative attitudes toward one another and how this perception could affect immigrants' lives in their host country, given the ongoing political tension between the two countries and the rising rate of immigration to the US.

We have incorporated the theories of "mirror image" and "imagined communities" into our research frameworks to further enhance our investigation. According to the mirror image theory, individuals have a tendency to accept and emulate the foreign policy of their representative government. Separately, Benedict Anderson's (1983) theory of imagined communities examines how people create a sense of attachment and belonging to a broader social group even when there are no direct interpersonal links [7][8]. The development and preservation of national and cultural identities are crucial to our study of the views between Iranians and Americans, and this theory offers a useful lens through which to view these processes. We can better understand how shared perceptions, beliefs, and cultural narratives contribute to the formation of social identities and the attitudes people have toward one another by including the notion of imagined communities in our research. Additionally, by using mirror image theory, we may investigate the extent to which historical events, government narratives, and the media shape and sustain people's perceptions of a country that their government views as a threat. We aim to provide a thorough analysis of the complex dynamics driving Iranians' and Americans' views toward one another by combining the theory of imagined communities with our current mirror image conceptual framework.

It was difficult to formulate specific assumptions because our study was exploratory in nature. However, based on pertinent theoretical frameworks and extant literature, we propose that intergroup attitudes are shaped and facilitated by the interaction of individual perceptions, collective identities, and sociocultural environment's identity formation. We hope to clarify the intricate processes underpinning intergroup perceptions and further knowledge of the elements affecting identity development and intergroup relations by analyzing Iranian and American views toward one another within this framework.

The US-Iranian relationship:

Iran and the United States have had a complicated relationship throughout history. Iran and the US were strategic allies before the Islamic Revolution in 1979. But, the United States started referring to Iran as the "arch of crisis," "crescent of crisis," "axis of evil," and even "the only enemy" in its prevailing political vocabulary after the revolution, especially during the hostage crisis [9]. Iran also began referring to the United States as "the great Satan" and "the only enemy." The hostage crisis significantly changed Americans' opinions of Iranians and marked a turning point in the already tumultuous political relationship between the two countries.

Perspectives of Americans on Iranians:

Iranians in the US were frequently seen as a highly educated, professional community with rich cultural and historical backgrounds who could contribute significantly to the nation before the hostage crisis [10]. However, following that incident, this positive viewpoint shifted drastically, and Iranians were labeled as "uncivilized terrorists" and even as an unwanted nation in the United States [11][12][13]. This change in perspective had far-reaching effects. For example, universities such as the University of New Mexico stopped accepting and enrolling

students from Iran, while restaurants refused to serve Iranians [14]. American business owners were urged to fire their Iranian staff, and Iranian companies were boycotted. The media and nationwide demonstrations further fueled animosity and prejudice toward Iranians.

American protesters expressed their dissatisfaction with the presence of Iranians in the United States by holding placards such as "Go Home Dumb Iranians", "60 Americans for 10,000 Iranians", and "10 Iranians Equal a Worm" [15]. People from other Middle Eastern nations had to show their nationality on their clothing to protect themselves from locals due to the intense animosity toward Iranians in the US.

Even years after the American hostages were freed, there were indications of schadenfreude rather than empathy [16] among Americans [17], indicating how drastically Americans' perceptions of Iranians had changed. The way Americans reacted after the US Navy shot down an Iranian passenger airliner may be evidence of schadenfreude following the US Navy's shooting down of an Iranian passenger airliner in the Persian Gulf in 1988, which caused more than 300 passengers—including children—to perish. In fact, 71% of Americans thought that the firing of the Iranian jet had accomplished justice for the hostage situation and that the victims should not receive compensation.

The fact that most Americans still consider Iran to be their only enemy even after the 1979 hostage crisis is proof that the historical hostility between the United States and Iran has lasted for many years [18]. This unfavorable impression was further strengthened by President George W. Bush's designation of Iran as a terrorist supporter in his January 2002 State of the Union speech, which led to the introduction of the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS) the following year [19]. The Trump administration's rejection of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and its ban on Iranians entering the US reinforced the negative perception of Iranians, although both countries made some attempts to improve relations during Obama's presidency (such as direct interaction for the first time after the revolution and the signing of the JCPOA) [20][21].

The Self-Identity of Iranians:

The self-identity and way of life of Iranians residing in the US have been impacted by this historical tension, especially those who were exiled or previously immigrated, or following the revolution (referred to as the second immigrant wave between 1979 and 2001). Most of these Iranian immigrants, who came from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, made an effort to disassociate themselves from their Iranian culture and ancestry. As a method of cultural transformation, they employed cultural assimilation, which involves identifying with the cultural norms that are valued in the host society [22][23].

Many Iranian immigrants have changed their names and physical appearance through dieting and cosmetic surgery to conform to cultural norms valued in the host culture due to hostility toward Iranians and the desire to be accepted as other nationalities, especially Americans. They assimilated away from their own culture and felt that success in the US was associated with a 'whiter' body [10]

I lacked a sense of national identity for a very long time. You are aware of the unique sense of guilt experienced by Iranians of my generation who immigrated to the United States. For members of my generation, being Iranian in this nation was defined by the hostage situation and the guilt we felt about being Iranian. It wasn't until four or five years ago that I started cooking Iranian food. I didn't have any Iranian items in my flat as I do today. I didn't celebrate Norooz and release the Haft Seen till two or three years ago. These are aspects of culture that were suppressed. During the hostage situation, I would pretend to be Italian, Afghan, or anything else to avoid being identified as Iranian when I wanted to go out and interact with people. An English literature professor at the University of California said, "I was ashamed to own my Iranianness" [24] (p. 249).

Travel Prohibition and Ongoing Disagreements:

When President Trump signed a travel restriction in January 2017, the perception of tensions between the US and Iran took on a tangible form. This executive order, sometimes referred to as the travel ban or the Muslim ban, prohibited entrance for those who were born in Yemen, Iran, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, and Sudan to the United States. People with dual citizenship or permanent residency cards (also known as green cards) from any of these seven nations were prohibited from entering the United States. The ban was temporarily blocked after it sparked protests and reactions on a national and international level, as well as legal challenges in federal courts. Before President Trump signed Executive Order 13780 in April 2018 and the Supreme Court affirmed it, the executive order was amended by presidential proclamation and encountered similar difficulties. As a result, applicants from seven nations—Iran, Libya, North Korea, Venezuela, Somalia, Yemen, and Syria—were prohibited from obtaining immigrant and nonimmigrant visas from US embassies and authorities [25].

The country became divided as a result of the travel restriction; some Americans were in favor of it, while others were against it. According to a CNN survey of more than a thousand Americans from a variety of demographic backgrounds, 47% of respondents supported President Trump's executive order.

In a similar vein, 44% of respondents to an NBC/Wall Street Journal survey supported the travel restriction, while 45% opposed it [26].

The Study's Objective:

For many years, there have been tensions and hostility between Iran and the United States because both nations see the other as a danger to their respective interests. The depiction of one another as adversaries by a narrative of animosity and mistrust between the two countries has been maintained by their respective governments and government-sponsored media outlets, and this has unavoidably trickled down to their respective populations. The goal of the current study is to investigate how Iranian and American citizens view one another, with an emphasis on whether or not they have a "less biased perspective". In order to address the research issues, the study uses both qualitative and quantitative approaches in an exploratory mixed-method approach.

Participants from both nations participated in semi-structured interviews as part of the qualitative technique used in this study. The interview questions center on the 1979 hostage situation at the US embassy in Tehran and the missile attack on an Iranian passenger airliner, two crucial events that have profoundly affected the relationship between Iran and the United States. Additionally, participants were asked what they thought of the citizens of both nations. The study's quantitative component entails a modified self-reported survey that investigates participants' opinions regarding the more recent occurrence—the Trump administration's travel ban.

The sociocultural distinctions between Iran and the United States are also taken into consideration when choosing the participants. Americans emphasize individualism more than Iranians do collectivism. These variations may have an impact on how people in these countries feel about other people and how they perceive their social group membership [27][28]. Additionally, there has been a history of violence and animosity between the United States and Iran, which may have affected how both countries' citizens see one another. This study's theoretical framework is based on the frameworks of imagined communities and mirror images. Mirror image theory [29] states that when two countries are in a competitive and frequently overtly antagonistic relationship, each nation's inhabitants have a tendency to denigrate the other and exalt their own. This feature of mirror image theory offers important insights into the dynamics of perceptions amongst groups. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the mirror image phenomenon is not the only factor influencing individual perceptions and group identities. As a result, we take a thorough approach in this study by

combining the mirror image framework with the theory of "imagined communities". We hope to convey the intricacy and subtleties of Iranians' and Americans' views of one another by utilizing the notion of imagined communities, which investigates how people create a sense of attachment and belonging to a broader social group. We can investigate the relationship between mirror image biases and the sociocultural settings that shape perceptions thanks to this dual theoretical approach. By using this method, we hope to shed light on the possibility of better ties between the two countries and offer a more thorough understanding of the attitudes that Americans and Iranians have toward one another.

The analysis of this study is guided by the following research questions:

How do participants from the United States and Iran view the relationship between the two countries in light of certain significant events in their respective modern histories? If there are any mirror image biases, how do these viewpoints represent them?

Taking into account their preconceptions and stereotypes, how do participants from both nations describe members of their own and the opposing groups?

Supplies and Procedures:

Participants:

The information presented in this study is a portion of a bigger investigation that looked into sympathetic responses from individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Participants' nationality (e.g., Iranian or American), place of residence (e.g., Iran or the US), and developmental characteristics (e.g., age, education, and marital status) were the inclusion criteria for this study [30]. The final sample comprised 226 individuals, of which 87 were Americans, 77 were Iranians, and 62 were Iranians residing in the United States after incomplete responses (N = 20) were eliminated. All participants were between the ages of 20 and 40, with an average age of 26.63 ± 7.61 for Americans, 28.32 ± 6.72 for Iranians, and 31.76 ± 3.84 for the third group, to account for the developmental trajectory of empathy. Of the American participants, 47 said they were Democrats, 17 said they were Republicans, and the remaining participants were either independent (N = 10) or not associated with any political party (N = 13). The Institutional Review Board-approved online consent forms, which included a thorough description of the terms and conditions of the study, were given to each participant to sign. The study was carried out in compliance with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its subsequent amendments or similar ethical standards, as well as the institutional and/or national research committee's ethical guidelines. The main demographic characteristics of participants in each of the three groups, broken down by gender, are summarized in Table 1 [31].

Table 1. Demographic profile of participants

Group	Sample Size (N)	Mean Age	SD
Americans	87	26.63	7.61
Iranians	77	28.32	6.72
Iranians in the USA	62	31.76	3.84
Total	**226**	-	-

Table 2. Political affiliations of American respondents

Political Affiliation	Number
Democrat	47
Republican	17
Independent	10
No Affiliation	13
Total	87

Inspiration:

Two different surveys were carried out after the first iteration of the travel ban was put into effect to gauge how Americans felt about different aspects of Donald Trump's presidency, including their thoughts on the visa restriction and his general performance. The survey's questions addressed a wide range of topics, including immigration, foreign policy, and the nation's financial stability. As a result, it's possible that respondents' opinions of Trump's presidency as a whole affected their particular reactions to the travel restriction. Therefore, there is a lack of direct evidence indicating Americans' specific perspectives towards Iranians in the US. Furthermore, given that a sizable portion of the international students impacted by the travel ban were Iranian nationals, it is remarkable that the survey did not collect data on Iranians' sentiments toward the travel ban [32]. In light of these factors, the study modified questions from a CNN poll about the travel ban and its alleged effects (i.e., protecting Americans from potential terror attacks) in order to investigate whether mirror image and imagined communities' frameworks hold for our participants. A succinct explanation of the travel ban, taken from Mansouri and Keles, was included with these questions. The same description and questions were translated for Iranian participants using the method described in Wind et al.'s study [33], while American and Iranian participants were requested to read and answer the English version of the survey and description. The travel ban is a result of President Donald Trump's Executive Order (EO) titled "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States." As a result, entry into the United States is prohibited for citizens of Iran, North Korea, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Somalia, and Venezuela. Seventy-two percent of the 20,000 affected students and scholars are Iranian [34].

Inquiries:

"In general, are you in favor of or against this executive order?"

Preference:

Contrary to "Do you believe that this executive order:
Prevents terrorism in the United States.
Reduces US security against terrorism.
Has no bearing.

A semi-structured online interview was also conducted with each participant to get their opinions about both the other country and their own. They were specifically asked to explain their opinions about Iran and Iranians, as well as the United States and Americans. The participants were given brief accounts of two significant events—the hostage crisis in 1979 and the missile assault on Iran Air 655 in 1988—to set the scene. Participants answered two Likert-scale questions after reading the descriptions of each incident. While the second question sought to gauge participants' opinions of justice in respect to the shooting of Iran Air 655 and identify any indications of schadenfreude among Americans, the first question focused on the two nations' general relationship. Additionally, open-ended narrative responses were used to invite participants to express their thoughts regarding these instances, enabling a more thorough examination of their viewpoints.

US hostage situation (taken from Wikipedia): Fifty-two American diplomats and citizens were held hostage for 444 days from 4 November 1979 to 20 January 1981, after a group of Iranian college students belonging to the Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line, who supported the Iranian Revolution, took over the US Embassy in Tehran. Following President Reagan's second-term inaugural address, all hostages were released. Iranian missile strike [35]: Iran Air Flight 655 was a planned passenger flight that traveled via Bandar Abbas from Tehran to Dubai. On July 3, 1988, a surface-to-air missile fired from the US Navy's USS Vincennes shot it down. All 290 passengers, including 66 children, perished when the airplane was destroyed. Shortly after leaving Bandar Abbas International Airport, the flight's layover point, the aircraft was struck while flying over Iran's territorial waters in the Persian Gulf.

How do you feel about these occurrences?
Do you believe these oughts to have occurred? Please include as much information as you can.
Do you consider the United States and Iran to be adversaries?
Indeed
Not
Perhaps:
Do you believe the missile attack served justice?
Indeed
Not
Perhaps

Do you believe that the victims of the missile assault should receive compensation from the United States?

Method:

We used social media sites and group texting apps like Facebook and Telegram to find Iranian volunteers in Iran. A thorough explanation of A link to the Qualtrics survey was released along with the study's qualifying requirements, which included being American or Iranian, living in the US or Iran, and being between the ages of 20 and 40. The study was open to potential volunteers of any gender or ethnicity who satisfied the requirements and indicated a desire to take part. With the help of international offices and Iranian student organizations at universities, we used university email platforms and social media channels for participants residing in the United States. A thorough study description and the survey link were distributed to qualified participants via the email lists of these organizations and their overseas offices following the acquisition of the required approvals from the relevant universities. We were able to connect with a wide variety of Americans who had Iranian ancestry because of this strategy. All participants were contacted using the email provided at the end of the survey in order to allow the study's last component, which entailed online interviews. To obtain more qualitative information, interviews were arranged and carried out via email correspondence.

Analysis of Data:

To provide a thorough and rigorous analysis, we used a mixed method in our qualitative data analysis, integrating deductive reasoning with grounded theory. Grounded theory, which emphasizes concluding straight from the evidence, served as a foundation for our research. Our investigation of intergroup perceptions was guided by a series of preliminary research questions and theoretical ideas, such as the mirror image and imagined communities. Concurrently, we allowed for inductive thinking by being receptive to themes and ideas that emerged straight from the data. The coding process was conducted systematically, involving multiple rounds of coding. Initial codes were derived from the research questions and theoretical concepts, and as the analysis progressed, we constantly compared the emerging findings with existing literature, theoretical frameworks, and our research aims. The comments were initially organized into different clustered matrices based on participants' group affiliations (Americans, Iranians, and Iranians living in the US). After that, we carried out three coding rounds in which we methodically found and created different categories within the data. Thematic analysis served as the primary method for evaluating open-ended comments and transcribed interview data, with grounded theory serving as the underlying theoretical framework [36]. By adopting this blended approach, we aimed to maintain a grounded and systematic analysis while incorporating our research objectives and theoretical perspectives.

We assessed each category and took into account their frequencies to guarantee rigor and dependability, combining related themes for a thorough examination of the data [37]. We were able to achieve a balance between the inductive nature of grounded theory and the integration of our research objectives and theoretical notions thanks to this hybrid technique,

strengthening our analysis's depth and validity. We sought to provide a nuanced view of participants' replies by using a methodical and rigorous methodology that acknowledged the richness of the data as well as the impact of our research objectives. NVivo 11, a qualitative data analysis program for evaluating qualitative and mixed-method research data, was used for the analyses. We used independent chi-square tests of homogeneity to gauge participants' opinions about the relationship between Iran and the US. These tests were selected because non-parametric tests were more appropriate given the categorical nature of the variables in question, such as the travel ban, hostage situation, and missile attack. IBM SPSS, version 25, was used for the quantitative analysis. We sought to investigate any noteworthy variations or correlations between participants' judgments based on their nationality and the relevant category variables by employing these statistical tests.

Outcomes:

RQ1. How do American and Iranian participants view the relationship between the United States and Iran differently in light of particular significant events in their contemporary past? If there are any mirror image biases, how do these viewpoints represent them?

As previously stated, participants' impressions of three events that significantly influenced the development of the relationship between Iran and the US over the previous 40 years were investigated through two sets of questions. The first set had to do with the hostage situation and missile strike that happened soon after the Iranian revolution and caused the two nations' relationship to change. The second set focused on the most recent event that directly impacted Iranians residing in the United States: the travel restriction. The results are shown in the next section according to the sequence in which study participants saw the questions.

The Travel Prohibition:

Table 3. Support for the Trump-era travel ban

Group	Supported Ban	Opposed Ban
Americans	13	74
Iranians	8	69
Iranians in the USA	0	62

Table 4. Perceptions regarding the travel ban and US security.

Group	Believed Ban Improves Security (%)
Americans	15
Iranians	17
Iranians in the USA	3

The participants' attitudes regarding the travel ban and their nationalities were compared using a chi-square test of homogeneity. Since all anticipated cell counts exceeded five, the sample size assumption is satisfied. Participants' opinions about the travel ban were the subject of the first question. The findings showed that the three groups' opinions regarding the travel ban differed somewhat but statistically significantly (X^2 (2, N = 226) = 9.78, p = 0.008, Cremer's V = 0.208). Thirteen of the eighty-seven American participants supported the travel ban, compared to eight (10%) Iranians and zero Iranians residing in the United States. Pairwise comparisons using the z-test of proportions with a Bonferroni adjustment were part of the post hoc analysis. The percentage of Americans who supported the travel ban was not different from that of Iranians ($p > 0.05$), but it was much greater than that of the third group ($p < 0.05$). Similarly, compared to Iranians residing in the US, a considerably larger percentage of Iranian participants supported the travel ban ($p < 0.05$). Participants' perceptions regarding the impact of the travel ban on US safety were the subject of the second question. According to the results, only 3% of respondents who were Iranians residing in the US believed that prohibiting certain persons (from the countries listed in the travel ban) from entering the nation would make the US safer from terrorism, compared to 15% of Americans and 17% of

Iranian participants. There was a significant difference between the groups (X 2 (4, N = 226) = 28.2, p < 0.001, Cremer's V = 0.25). The third group and their American and Iranian counterparts differed statistically significantly (p < 0.005), as predicted by the pairwise comparison result; however, there was no difference between Iranian and American participants (p > 0.05).

Missile Attack and Hostage Situation:

Participants' opinions of the hostage situation and the missile attack were compared using a chi-square test of homogeneity. Eleven participants—two Americans, one Iranian, and eight Iranians residing in the US—were not included in the study because they failed to respond to these questions. The first question asked participants if they thought Iran and the US were adversaries. There were three possible answers: yes, maybe, and no. The sample size assumption was satisfied because all anticipated cell counts were higher than five. The findings showed that the opinions of the three groups differed statistically significantly (X 2 (4, N = 215) = 48.79, p < 0.001, Cremer's V is equal to 0.34. Of the American participants, 22 said "yes," 48 said "maybe," and 15 said, "the two countries are not enemies." In a similar vein, 20 Iranians believed that Iran and the US were adversaries, while the remaining respondents said either maybe (N = 26) or no (N = 30). It's interesting to note that, in contrast to the majority of participants in the third group (N = 41), only five of them believed that Iran and the US were adversaries. The proportion of participants who chose "maybe" or "no" varied significantly between the three groups, according to the z-test of proportions with a Bonferroni correction (ps < 0.05). The second question asked participants if they thought the shooting down of the Iranian passenger jet served American justice. For this question, the same set of options—yes, maybe, and no—was offered. Since all anticipated cell counts exceeded five, the sample size assumption was satisfied. The findings showed that there was no statistically significant difference in the three groups' views on justice (X 2 (4, N = 215) = 2.168, p = 0.705, Cremer's V = 0.071). Only one American and one Iranian responded in the affirmative, in contrast to the first question. Most participants in all three groups (Americans = 71, Iranians = 68, and Iranians residing in the State = 46) chose "no" and believed that justice had not been done.

In order to gain a better understanding of respondents' sentiments toward each of the situations (such as the hostage crisis and missile assault), the answers to the survey's open-ended questions were carefully examined. Participants were asked to share their thoughts on the incidents and whether they should have occurred in the first open-ended question. In the second question, participants were asked about their opinions on paying the victims of the missile strike. To find the correlations between the different categories, all of the comments were converted into a thematically clustered matrix.

Table 5. Perceptions of whether Iran and the United States are enemies

Group	Yes (Enemies)	Maybe	No
Americans	22	48	15
Iranians	20	26	30
Iranians in the USA	5	41	8

American:

The majority (N = 57) of the 87 American respondents thought that both incidents were wrong and should never have occurred. However, three participants thought the missile attack was a perfect example of the United States punishing its adversaries, regardless of the individuals involved. One respondent, for instance, commented, "No, this is why we [Americans] shouldn't let them into our country because they [Iranians] kill us when we go to their country" of those who thought both events were bad, 27 respondents said that the missile attack was more terrible and immoral than the hostage situation because it murdered innocent people, especially children. One person said, for instance, "I 100% disagree with the

destruction of the airplane and the murder of the passengers and crew." I believe that the United States has a long history of imperialism throughout the world, and its dealings with the Middle East are no different. Iran unquestionably has the right to carry out its business without US intervention. Sixty-three respondents said that the US should have provided compensation for the missile attack. However, ten respondents agreed that such compensation shouldn't have been given, while the remaining respondents weren't sure.

Iranians:

The first open-ended question was answered in full and in depth by sixty-three Iranian respondents (82%). Nearly every participant expressed disapproval of both occurrences and declared that neither ought to have occurred. However, seven people strongly condemned the missile attack while endorsing the hostage situation. They used the two countries' shared history as well as the United States' actions and espionage on Iranian affairs to defend their reactions. One participant commented, for instance, that "the hostage crisis should not have happened that way, since Americans destroyed lots of documents and the revolutionary forces could not get hold of most of the documents." If an embassy is working against my country's citizens, I think it should be held accountable. However, the missile attack was an indication of the USA's persecution and bullying. Conversely, four participants criticized the hostage situation while claiming that the missile launch was accidental and the product of human error. "None should have happened," one participant wrote. But it is unacceptable that the hostage situation was deliberate. However, even though the missile attack was entirely accidental, the United States never expressed regret and instead awarded the commander a medal of honor. Other participants characterized each gathering as a chance for the governments of Iran and the United States to advance their own agendas and beliefs. While the Iranian government used the missile attack to further its anti-Western ideology, the hostage situation gave Republicans in the United States a chance to campaign against President Carter. In response to the last question, 62 respondents said that the United States should have provided compensation to the relatives of the victims, while just seven said that no compensation was necessary.

Iranians in the United States:

Table 6. Positive perceptions of Iranian people across participant groups

Group Providing Opinion	Main Positive Descriptions
Americans	Intelligent, hardworking, culturally rich
Iranians	Caring, kind, resilient
Iranians in the USA	Intelligent, hardworking, culturally rich

Table 7. Positive perceptions of Americans across participant groups

Group Providing Opinion	Main Positive Descriptions
Americans	Diverse, independent, opportunity-oriented
Iranians	Free, intelligent, self-confident
Iranians in the USA	Hospitable, kind, value-driven

43 individuals from the third group gave thorough answers to the first open-ended question concerning both instances (i.e., hostage and missile attack crisis). Nearly all respondents (N = 42) said that both occurrences were incorrect and shouldn't have occurred. The other participants gave equal weight to both occurrences, while only one said that the missile attack was immoral. In a similar vein, 41 individuals blamed the Iranian regime for both incidents, while only one held the United States responsible for the missile assault. According to responses to the last question, 33 individuals thought that the United States should pay compensation to the victims of the missile attack, while 12 others disagreed or were unsure.

RQ2: Taking into account their perceptions and stereotypes, how do participants from both countries describe members of their own and the opposing groups?

Nationality and Perception: Divergent Opinions and Cultural Contradictions

Americans:

Out of the 83 answers to the question about how Iranians are perceived, according to 38 American respondents, Iranians are intelligent, kind, and hardworking individuals with a lengthy history and rich culture. Some of the respondents learned about Iran through their interactions with Iranian students at their colleges. Iranians, for instance, are "warm, culturally rich people from one of the oldest civilizations on the planet, constantly mistreated by Americans through misguided foreign policy after WWII," according to one participant. Eight individuals said they knew nothing about Iran or Iranians. According to six respondents, the US media misrepresents and labels Iranians according to stereotypes. The remaining respondents described the people and the nation as being in the Middle East, according to a dictionary definition. When asked about their "perceptions of Americans," 17 participants said that Americans are "close-minded, judgmental, and polarized people" who cherish their autonomy. Furthermore, twenty of the participants admitted that Americans are diverse, while the remaining participants characterized the nation as a land of opportunity with political contradictions.

Iranians:

The findings of the thematic analysis of the Iranian interview questions showed that the majority of participants characterized Iranians as intelligent, compassionate individuals who are being undermined by their administration. One participant stated, for instance, that "Iranians are still caring and kind despite being oppressed." "If the government permits it, Iran is the best place to live," wrote a different reply. Nonetheless, the majority of participants expressed a sense of hopelessness in their descriptions, believing that both the nation and its citizens were a mixture of contradictions. Conversely, individuals had more favorable opinions about Americans. One wrote, for instance, that "America is a free country with highly self-esteemed people." "Americans are intelligent people and always try to learn something in their daily interactions," another person remarked. However, other respondents said that "Americans are narrow-minded and heavily influenced by the media." Iranian participants' opinions of Americans were more favorable than those of Americans. This is intriguing since the majority of participants relied mostly on non-governmental controlled media for information and had little direct exposure to American culture.

Iranians in the United States:

According to 32 respondents, Iran and Iranians are a "beautiful and culturally rich country with nice and hard-working, and intelligent people." But, nearly 50% of those surveyed emphasized how people are currently "living in misery and being imprisoned by the government." Additionally, some respondents characterized Iranians as pious, contradictory, and sad. However, according to 35 participants, Americans are "hospitable, kind, and loving human beings committed to their values." Americans are "needy and rich and lazy people," according to just two participants. This demonstrates that, in comparison to their home country, Iranians residing in the US have more favorable opinions of their host nation.

Conversation:

The goal of the current study was to examine how Iranians, Americans, and Iranians residing in the US perceived two significant events that took place following Iran's Islamic Revolution. The relationship between Iran and the United States was severely damaged by these episodes. The study specifically looked at the US embassy hostage incident, which entailed American people being held captive and caused a great deal of grief across the country until the hostages were freed. Iran suffered greatly as a result of the second incident, the Iran Air 655 missile attack, which claimed many Iranian lives, including innocent children. Additionally, participants were invited to discuss their thoughts on the travel restriction, a current political issue that directly impacted Iranian people, especially those who lived in the

United States. Additionally, participants were asked to define citizens from both their own country and the other country in order to shed light on the mirror image and imagined communities' phenomena, which refer to how citizens' perceptions of another country are shaped by their own government's relationship. The purpose of this investigation was to learn how people create their identities and sense of belonging in their separate national communities and how these views affect their opinions toward the other nation. The results of the study will be discussed in the same order as they were in Section 5.

Prohibition on Travel:

The first topic covered in the analysis of the study's findings is the travel ban, which was looked at based on participants' consent to its implementation and their opinions of the implied repercussions. The results show that only a small portion of participants in each of the three groups said they supported the travel ban. Interestingly, American and Iranian participants' perspectives were more similar than those of Iranians living in the United States. In a similar vein, compared to participants in the third group, a greater percentage of American and Iranian participants thought that prohibiting nationals of the nations included in the travel ban would improve American security against terrorism. Nonetheless, the majority of participants in all three groups disagreed with the executive order and said that putting such a ban into effect would not significantly affect American security. Given that both groups showed a greater degree of support for the ban than Iranians living in the United States, mirror image theory may be able to explain the similarities in viewpoints between American and Iranian participants. The same viewpoints of their respective governments on the prohibition may have an impact on this alignment. Additionally, the perspectives of the participants might have been formed by their shared narratives, national identities, and imagined communities. Indicating a sense of unity and common issues across national lines, participants from all three groups voiced opposition to the executive order. This implies that people can come to understand and sympathize with those impacted by the travel ban, bridging national borders and creating a common imagined community.

It's interesting to note that these results differ from those of surveys by CNN and NBC/Wall Street Journal, which revealed a virtually equal split of respondents in favor of the travel ban. This discrepancy could be caused by several things. First, since a sizable portion of the American participants identified as Democrats, their political party affiliation may have shaped their opinions. The fact that the polls were conducted right after the first iteration of the travel ban and this study was conducted three years later, after further domestic and international debates and protests, may also have contributed to the differences in timing between the two. It's conceivable that these incidents raised public awareness and shaped perceptions of the travel ban's purported defense of American security.

As anticipated, the study discovered that every Iranian participant residing in the United States voiced significant opposition to the travel ban. The findings indicate that the travel ban had a major negative effect on the higher education industry, which is consistent with earlier research as demonstrated by the significant drop in foreign applicants to US universities [38]. The majority of universities that host international students from the prohibited nations claimed that stress and anxiety were common among their students [39]. Iranian students were disproportionately affected by the travel ban, which prevented them from seeing their relatives and caused them a great deal of anxiety. The ambiguity surrounding the students' prospects—there was no clear indication of when the ban would be lifted or what lay ahead for them—compounded the emotional toll of the restriction.

Missile Attack and Hostage Situation:

The answers to these sets of questions are comparable to those of the earlier inquiry concerning the travel ban. In other words, the responses of Iranian participants residing in the United States differed from those of Americans and Iranians. While the majority of American

and Iranian participants viewed the relationship between the two nations as problematic, most believed that Iran and the United States are not adversaries. However, nearly every participant from every group felt that justice was not done for Americans as a result of the downing of the Iranian jet and that neither the hostage situation nor the missile attack should have occurred.

In order to delve deeper into the thoughts of the participants, two more questions were posed, asking them to describe how they perceived Iranians and Americans. The results pertaining to participants' opinions of the US-Iran relationship are consistent with the ideas of imagined communities and mirror images. Compared to Americans and Iranians living in Iran, Iranian participants in the US showed a different viewpoint. This distinction can be explained by their special status as people who span both cultures and possess a more sophisticated comprehension of the dynamics between the two nations. They indicated a more favorable view of the relationship by expressing the opinion that Iran and the US are not adversaries. However, participants from Iran and the United States indicated ambiguity regarding the nature of the relationship and thought it was complex. This implies that more general political narratives, media portrayals, and historical occurrences could contradict their perceptions.

They are nevertheless unable to develop a solid understanding of the US-Iran relationship and the historical background of the hostage crisis and the missile attack, even though they may not agree with the policies of their respective governments. Interestingly, most participants felt that the hostage situation and the missile attack should not have happened, regardless of their group allegiance. The consensus that these tragedies were regrettable and preventable is reflected in this shared attitude. Participants also voiced the opinion that the victims did not receive justice after the Iranian airliner was shot down. These answers show a cross-national empathy and understanding of the human effect of these events.

Perception and Nationality:

Strong conclusions were drawn from the examination of participants' written comments regarding the hostage situation and missile attack. In every participant group, the majority felt that these occurrences were immoral and that the victims had not received justice. The missile attack, which tragically claimed the lives of innocent people, including children, had an especially profound emotional impact. When evaluating the moral ramifications of these instances, American participants showed a more nuanced viewpoint, realizing the significance of adopting a wider perspective. Iranians in Iran, as well as those residing in the US, expressed a similar opinion and stressed the importance of historical knowledge in precisely assessing the moral ramifications of these events.

Interesting results were obtained from the examination of written responses to the four open-ended questions on participants' attitudes about the two episodes and their perceptions of one another. Most participants from all groups said that the hostage crisis and missile attack were ethically wrong and that the victims had not received justice. Since the missile attack claimed the lives of innocent people, especially children, its emotional effects were felt more keenly. American participants acknowledged the need to consider the moral consequences of these instances from a wider perspective, even though they showed a more nuanced attitude toward them. The same logic was used by Iranians residing in Iran and the US, who agreed that understanding the past is necessary to properly evaluate the occurrences' moral ramifications. These results deepen our understanding of the complex relationship between the US and Iran and emphasize the importance of historical knowledge and empathy in promoting cultural sensitivity.

A universal human sensibility that cuts across country boundaries is indicated by the general acknowledgement of the wrongness of these acts. It implies that participants have a basic sense of moral empathy despite variations in viewpoints and historical background.

The study's findings show a shift in perceptions over time and contrast with research done following the hostage situation and missile attack. According to earlier research, the majority of American respondents thought Justice had been done, and the US Navy's downing of the Iranian aircraft was seen as either morally acceptable or reasonable. The majority of participants in all categories, however, felt that justice had not been done and that these acts were ethically wrong, according to the study's findings. Numerous causes could be responsible for this change in attitudes. First of all, time has probably had an impact. The missile assault and hostage crisis happened many years ago, and as time passes, their emotional impact may lessen. The emotions and sensitivities around these instances may have subsided, enabling a more critical and introspective evaluation.

Additionally, the existence of schadenfreude—pleasure obtained from the misery of others—in earlier research indicates that these feelings are fleeting. In the immediate aftermath of the events, when emotions were up and patriotic sentiments were predominant, schadenfreude might have been more noticeable. But as time goes on and a more comprehensive viewpoint is acquired, people could reconsider their original responses and take a more sympathetic stand. When analyzing the disparate findings among studies, it is crucial to take these temporal and psychological elements into account.

The study's findings about the evolution of views show how public opinion is dynamic and how temporal distance affects collective memory and perceptions. The results show that both groups have favorable opinions about Americans and Iranians. American participants acknowledged the maltreatment and distortion of Iran and its people in Western contexts and showed an awareness of Iran's cultural and historical heritage. They realized that these unfavorable depictions were caused by conflicts between governments rather than the people. Iranians, on the other hand, had positive opinions of Americans, characterizing them as free people residing in a free nation. The changing perspectives of Iran's younger generations could be one reason for this optimistic outlook. While maintaining the great features of their own tradition, like Nowruz, they are rapidly adopting Western cultural norms and lifestyles. These people see themselves as contemporary Iranians who reject the government's politically mandated anti-Western policies. This suggests a deliberate attempt to keep a less prejudiced view of Americans and a readiness to confront unfavorable preconceptions that are supported by their own government and media.

These results cast doubt on the idea of the mirror image phenomenon, which holds that citizens' opinions of another nation are shaped by the mindset of their own government. Remarkably, both Iranians and Americans showed more self-criticism rather than disparaging the other country, suggesting a divergence from the anticipated prejudices connected to mirror image dynamics. They showed the capacity to uphold a less prejudiced viewpoint and fend off the unfavorable stereotypes propagated by their own governments and media.

This implies that people are capable of making their own decisions and are not greatly influenced by the unfavorable stereotypes spread by their governments. These results shed light on the intricate relationship between mirror image and imagined communities, emphasizing the possibility of knowing one another and overcoming cultural barriers between Iranians and Americans.

When compared to the other two groups, the comments of Iranian participants residing in the US show a more circumspect and conservative stance. Instead of firmly supporting either the American or Iranian viewpoint, the participants chose a moderate position. Many of them admitted that Americans may have a poor perception of Iranians and blamed the Iranian regime for the instances under discussion. This position may be explained

by the current political climate in both Iran and the US, which may have affected how cautiously they expressed their views. Iranian students in the US were more cautious and less explicit in their answers because they were especially worried about the possible repercussions of taking part in studies examining the relationship between Iran and the US. Their attitude may also be explained by their strategy for integrating into the host culture. Iranian participants may have decided to disparage the Iranian government and their fellow Iranians in an attempt to successfully assimilate into the host culture and disassociate themselves from any unfavorable opinions of them. By highlighting their cultural and historical roots, such as identifying as Persians rather than Iranians and promoting their unique cultural customs and food, they simultaneously attempted to restore their identity. This tactic is consistent with earlier studies on Iranian-Americans who selectively destroy elements of their heritage ties to their native culture in reaction to possible persecution.

These results demonstrate the intricate processes of identity negotiation and cultural integration among people who live abroad and identify as bicultural. It highlights the difficult balancing act they perform as they attempt to maintain their cultural heritage while separating themselves from unfavorable preconceptions. These insights advance our knowledge of the complex experiences of people residing abroad and the tactics they use to lessen discrimination and potential difficulties.

It is crucial to remember that government relationships are not the only factor that determines whether or not immigrants are accepted, even though the study's focus was on the complex and multifaceted nature of how people perceive each other when their governments have complicated political relationships. Put otherwise, the same kind of conduct and action is evident even in regions of the world where there is no antagonistic relationship between governments. It appears that the necessity for altruistic conduct is less important than having the same race, skin tone, and geographic region.

For instance, there are currently two categories of migrants seeking asylum in European nations: Middle Eastern and African refugees in the second category and Ukrainians in the first. These two categories of asylum seekers are subject to distinct criteria for approval and rejection. Less than 6 million Middle Eastern migrants have been allowed in Europe in the past ten years, even though over 5 million Ukrainians have lived in various European nations in the past six months [40][41]. European nations have accepted about 13% of the Ukrainian population. This is in contrast to fewer than 1% for Afghans who have been waiting for years to apply for asylum, including those who have been granted it in the US, even though Afghanistan has been at war for more than 20 years [42]. In addition, Poland took in over a million Ukrainian refugees in less than six months, while 4,000 Middle Eastern refugees were detained at the Belarusian-Polish border last year and denied entry, although dozens of them—including pregnant women and children—died from a severe cold [43]. Given the European mainstream broadcasts during the initial weeks of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this discriminating policy by European governments cannot be justified. Some of these broadcasts' anchors made it clear that Ukrainians are white, middle-class, educated, cultured, Christian, and have automobiles and appearances similar to "us." They differ from refugees from the Middle East whose origins are unclear [44]. It is therefore conceivable that those in need of assistance will be chosen more on the basis of their shared traits and ideals than on their circumstances and need.

Restrictions and Ideas for Further Study:

Every study contains constraints that could jeopardize the findings and how they are interpreted. Since the current study is not an exception, care should be taken when interpreting its findings, particularly before drawing any broad conclusions. By being aware of these restrictions and applying them to upcoming studies, we can enhance our comprehension of intergroup perceptions and strive to promote better relationships amongst various

communities. Limitations of the recruiting procedure: Because participants were mostly found through social media and academic settings, the recruitment approach had certain restrictions. The results might not be entirely applicable to the larger populations of Iranians and Americans because this could have added biases into the sample. Future research should strive for more diverse participant samples and take into account different recruitment strategies. Sample makeup bias: Because of their nationalities, Iranians and Americans were the study's primary emphasis. Although this made it possible to examine opinions between these two groups in great detail, it might make it more difficult to make generalizations about the attitudes of a larger community. When extrapolating the results outside of the study's participant population, care should be taken. Lack of a control group: The lack of a control group in the study limited the capacity to make direct comparisons or identify causal correlations. Instead of drawing firm conclusions about causality, this study's mixed-methods approach sought to give an exploratory investigation of attitudes. The validity of findings in this area will be strengthened by future studies that use experimental designs and control groups. Other factors impacting perceptions: Although the study examined the impact of major episodes, generational changes, and media/government narratives, it is crucial to acknowledge that there are probably other reasons driving the changing perceptions between Iranians and Americans. To provide a more thorough understanding of these processes, future research should include variables like socioeconomic characteristics, educational experiences, interpersonal interactions, cultural exchanges, and historical events. Longitudinal and comparative research is necessary: Deeper understanding of forgiveness, shifts in perception, and general patterns within intergroup contexts might be possible through longitudinal research that monitor attitude changes over time and comparative studies that look at a broader range of intergroup relationships. These studies can help develop a more thorough understanding of intergroup sentiments and direct international cooperation and reconciliation initiatives.

Table 8. Summary of the study's principal findings

Research Question	Main Finding
Travel Ban Attitudes	Majority opposed
US–Iran Relationship	Viewed as complex rather than purely hostile
Hostage Crisis	Considered wrong by most participants
Iran Air 655 Incident	Considered unjust by most participants
Compensation	Broad support across groups
Mirror Image Theory	Limited support
Imagined Communities Theory	Strong support
Perception of Iranians	Mostly positive
Perception of Americans	Mostly positive
Iranian-Americans	Most nuanced and balanced perspectives

Conclusions:

In summary, this study provides insightful information about how Iranians, Americans, and Iranians residing in the US perceive significant events that have affected the connection between the United States and Iran. We can better comprehend the intricate processes at work by using the theoretical frameworks of "mirror image" and "imagined communities." In contrast to the mirror image effect, the results show that people in all three groups were more critical of themselves than of the other country. This casts doubt on the idea that citizens' opinions are only influenced by the views of their own government and raises the possibility that people's opinions about such measures may be influenced by their political affiliation as well as their knowledge of the political environment and historical occurrences. The idea of imagined communities emphasizes how cultural and historical

narratives influence people's identities and perspectives. Iranian Americans in particular demonstrated a complex mindset, striking a balance between their assimilation into the host society and their cultural background. By denouncing the Iranian government and highlighting their unique cultural identity, they attempted to disassociate themselves from unfavorable stereotypes and prejudice. This is consistent with earlier studies on Iranian Americans severing ties to their ethnicity in order to avoid discrimination. In the future, it will be crucial to take these theoretical frameworks into account when analyzing attitudes and perceptions between countries. To have a more thorough knowledge of how these elements influence people's attitudes and perceptions, future research should examine the interactions between cultural values, media portrayals, historical events, and governmental policies. When creating more inclusive and successful policies that take into account the many viewpoints and experiences of the people and communities they affect, policymakers can benefit from these insights.

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