



Carolina Center for the
Study of the Middle East
and Muslim Civilizations

Duke
UNIVERSITY

MIDDLE EAST STUDIES
Center

CAROLINA
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K-12

Chasing the Dream: Lebanese and Persian Immigration to America

Overview

In this lesson, students will discover immigration stories of two distinct and often overlooked groups: Iranian (also known as Persian) immigrants and Lebanese immigrants. Students will discover the different factors that led these men and women to settle in North Carolina and how they contributed to North Carolina's economy and history. Students will work collaboratively to analyze secondary sources, including stories of immigrants and background information on immigration, and create a comparison chart detailing the similarities and differences between these two groups from the Middle East. Students will also gain a deeper understanding of the complex concept of what makes a place "home," allowing them to not only gain an educational understanding of immigration in North Carolina, but to also make deeper, personal connections to individual stories.

Essential/Compelling Question(s)

- How do people define home in terms of belonging, retaining cultural heritage and/or assimilating to a new place and culture?
- In what ways have Persian and Lebanese immigrants contributed to the culture and economy of North Carolina?

Grade(s)

11-12th Grade

Subject(s)

American History II

North Carolina Essential Standards

- **AH2.H.3** Understand the factors that led to exploration, settlement, movement, and expansion and their impact on United States development over time.
- **AH2.H.3.3** Explain the roles of various racial and ethnic groups in settlement and expansion since Reconstruction and the consequences for those groups (e.g., American Indians, African Americans, Chinese, Irish, Hispanics and Latino Americans, Asian Americans, etc.).
- **AH2.H.3.4** Analyze voluntary and involuntary immigration trends since Reconstruction in terms of causes, regions of origin and destination, cultural contributions, and public and governmental response (e.g., new immigrants, ports of entry, ethnic neighborhoods, settlement houses, immigration restrictions, etc.).

Materials

- Pens
- Paper (letter size)
- Poster board or easel paper
- Immigration sources (Note: you can either print out the different stories/images or project them on a screen and analyze the stories as a class)
 - Iranian Immigration to the United States (attached)

- Reminders of Home: Sepideh Saeedi (attached)
- Reminders of Home: Mehdi Emamian (attached)
- Reminders of Home: Rose Jackson (attached)
- [Cedars in the Pines: The Lebanese in North Carolina](#) (documentary: watch section 7:58-11:34)
- [The Early Lebanese in America: A Demographic Portrait, 1880-1930](#)
- [The Story of North Carolina Is the Story of Immigrants](#)
- Stations Worksheet: Analyzing Immigration Stories (attached)
- Computer or i-pad to show “Cedars in the Pines” documentary clip
- Projector/Smart board

Duration

Approximately 90 minutes

Procedure

Opening Activity: Defining the Concept of Home

1. On the board or another large area where students can see, write the following questions:
 - i. What is home? How do you define it? What do you need to make a home?
 - ii. What groups of immigrants might find North Carolina a place to settle? What qualities does North Carolina have that attracts immigrants?

Have students first brainstorm an answer to the questions individually, then have them discuss their responses with a partner, such as an “elbow buddy.” Direct the class to discuss their responses together.

Exploring Immigration Stories and Sources

2. Explain that North Carolina has attracted different and diverse groups of immigrants over time, from Scots-Irish to Germans, Italians, Japanese, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Latinos, and many more. Share that students will learn about immigration stories of two lesser-known groups from the Middle East: Lebanese and Iranian immigrants (often referred to as Persians). The stories and experiences of these Middle Eastern immigrants play an important role in North Carolina’s history, economy, and society. Create seven stations using the different stories and sites linked above, with each source as an individual station. Divide the students into small groups of 3-4. ****Note some of the stations will give background information that will be useful for the T-chart comparison to be completed later.****
3. Pass out copies of the stations worksheet: Analyzing Immigration Stories. Instruct groups to visit each station and view/explore/read the story or information presented. For each station students should the answer the following questions on their worksheet:
 - i. Does this source relate to Persian or Lebanese immigration?
 - ii. What is being presented by this source (give a brief summary of what the source is/does)?
 - iii. Describe any push and pull factors of immigration in the source.
 - iv. How has the immigrant in this source retained aspects of their culture of origin?
 - v. How difficult was it for the immigrant in this source to adapt to their new cultural surroundings?
 - vi. Based on the source, how did the immigrant contribute to the economy of North Carolina?
 - vii. Based on the source, how would this person’s definition of home differ or be similar to your definition of home?
 - viii. List 1-2 facts or points that you found interesting/useful about this source.
4. Students will rotate between the different stations and complete the worksheet for each source. You can give students the worksheet beforehand or have the worksheet at each station. You may have each student complete a worksheet individually, or have each group turn in a single worksheet for each station.

5. Once the students have completed the stations, they should remain in their groups to compare the experiences of Lebanese and Iranian immigrants. Students will create a T-chart comparing and contrasting the immigration stories and experiences between the Lebanese and Persians. For their T-charts, students should consider:
 - i. How were they similar?
 - ii. How were they different?
 - iii. Why immigrate to North Carolina?
 - iv. What kind of economic pursuits did each group partake in?

This should be completed using poster board or on large sheets of paper. When students are finished, have them display their comparisons and present their T-chart to the class.

Ending Activity: Objects from Home

6. In order for students to appreciate the courage shown by the immigrants they just learned about, they will complete a final activity to empathize with those who have left one “home” for another. In this activity, students will decide on which items they would bring with them if they had to leave their home and immigrate to another country. Ask students to think about the objects that are most important to them (i.e. objects of sentimental value, objects that relate to their hobbies, family heirlooms, important documents, photographs, etc.).
7. Give the students a time limit (such as 5 minutes), and a size restriction such as: “the items can only fit in your book bag” or “you can only pick 5 items.” Explain that there is a time or size limit because in many situations around the world, such as the crisis in Syria, people have to make quick decisions to leave their home. Often journeys begin on foot and immigrants can only carry limited items with them. Allow students to get frustrated at this, pose questions to them that help the students think about their items on a deeper level: “What kind of documentation might you need? How important are (item chosen by a student)? Why would you not take (insert item) over (item a student has chosen)?” End the activity by having the students share the different items they would take with them and discussion. Students should realize that immigrants make many difficult decisions before, during, and after they have left their home.
8. Conclude the class with a discussion on the importance of immigration in North Carolina. Remind students that many immigrants, such as those from Iran and Lebanon, have made important contributions to North Carolina by bringing new cultural opportunities and adding to the economy. As an exit ticket, have students write 3-2-1: 3 push or pull factors of immigration, 2 things they learned about Persian and Lebanese immigrants, and 1 thing that students can do to make a welcoming environment for immigrants.

Stations Worksheet: Analyzing Immigration stories

Name: _____

For each station you will need to answer the following questions. Make sure to take detailed notes in order to complete the T-Chart activity.

1. Does this source relate to Persian or Lebanese immigration?
2. What is being presented by this source (give a brief summary of what the source is/does)?
3. Describe any push and pull factors of immigration in the source.
4. How has the immigrant in this source retained aspects of their culture of origin?
5. How difficult was it for the immigrant in this source to adapt to their new cultural surroundings?
6. Based on the source, how did the immigrant contribute to the economy of North Carolina?
7. Based on the source, how would this person's definition of home differ or be similar to your definition of home?
8. List 1-2 facts or points that you found interesting/useful about this source.

CAROLINA CONNECTIONS

IRANIAN IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

While Iranians have been immigrating to the United States since well before the 20th century, three major waves of Iranian immigration began in the middle of the last century.

1950 – 1979

During this period, there was a large growth of the middle class in Iran in large cities due to increases in oil revenues, economic development, infrastructure, and domestic and foreign investments. Young Iranians were interested in higher education to support the new industries and career demands of economic changes. During this time, U.S. universities offered some of the best programs in engineering and other technical fields and both attracted and welcomed Iranian students. Students and visitors helped to establish networks that would support subsequent larger-scale immigration. Many students and visitors intended to return to Iran; however, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 prohibited them from doing so.

1979 – 2001

The 1979 revolution, the establishment of the Islamic Republic by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq from 1980 to 1988 all contributed to a migration of Iran's middle class out of the country. Immigrants who came to the United States during this time were primarily middle and upper-class families, many of whom were political refugees and exiles. Immigrants included ethnic and religious minorities who feared persecution, families associated with the previous government, and political dissenters.

2001 – Present

Policy and sentiment shifts in the United States in the years following September 11, 2001, made it more difficult for Iranians to obtain refugee visas and permanent residency status. These changes prompted the creation of Iranian American organizations, determined to safeguard the rights of Iranian American citizens and bring light to discriminatory media that affected their communities. As a result, Iranian American immigrant levels increased to more than 7,000 new arrivals in 2016. These numbers are likely to fall since the Trump administration's travel ban was upheld by the Supreme Court in June 2018.

A Glimpse into the Local Community | Iranian Cultural Society of North Carolina

The largest concentrated population of Iranian Americans is in California, although North Carolina has also been an attractive destination due to economic and educational opportunities. Iranian immigrants and their descendants have contributed to the economic and cultural development of North Carolina.

Established in 1987, the Iranian Cultural Society of North Carolina (ICSNC) plays an important role in preserving and promoting Persian language, literature, history, music, dance, art, food, and cultural celebrations for the benefit of Iranians as well as the greater community in the state. The group holds concerts, celebrates important holidays, such as the Persian New Year (Nowruz), and participates in international festivals to inform people about Iran and Iranian culture. The society has collaborated closely with the Carolina Center for the Study of the Middle East and Muslim Civilizations since 2009.

Mehdi Emamian, Rose Jackson, and Sepideh Saeedi are all members of the Iranian Cultural Society of North Carolina and affiliated with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Their migration stories share the significance of their cultural traditions in this section.

Sources

Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans

*Department of Homeland Security,
Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*

Reminders of Home

PERSIAN ART CONNECTING
HOMELAND AND DIASPORA



CAROLINA CONNECTIONS

SEPIDEH SAEEDI

Digital Data Curation Certificate Program Participant | School of Information and Library Science at UNC-Chapel Hill

Board Member | Iranian Cultural Society of North Carolina

When Sepideh Saeedi returns to North Carolina from her visits to Iran, she always tries to bring back traditional handicrafts, “As much as I can fit in my suitcase,” she says. Some of these handmade pieces, meant for everyday use, were out of fashion in Iran for Saeedi parents’ generation, but they’re making a comeback among the younger crowd.

It has always been part of Iranian culture to not only beautify the home with decorative items, but to support the artisans who make them. “When you purchase an item that’s been made by [an artisan], you support that craft,” Saeedi says. “Many Iranians are very sensitive about supporting the handicrafts and contributing to maintaining the tradition.”

In the United States as well, Persian decorative arts play an important role in helping immigrants maintain their cultural identity, helping to “preserve the memories of the place you came from, to be able to pass them down to the next generation,” Saeedi says.

Iranian immigrants often display reminders of their home country in their houses: paintings, calligraphy, and especially Persian carpets, which play an important role in everyday life. “You start seeing these motifs and these lines and patterns [in carpets] from a very early age, so they are engrained in our minds. They soothe your soul,” Saeedi says.

After growing up in Tehran, Saeedi left Iran and her family 10 years ago. She moved to a small town in upstate New York as a Ph.D. student studying archaeology and anthropology at the State University of New York at Binghamton. In 2016, she came to North Carolina, where she taught courses on cultural heritage at North Carolina State University and is now pursuing a certificate in digital data curation from the School of Information and Library Science at UNC-Chapel Hill. She hopes to apply the skills she learns at Carolina to cultural heritage data she is collecting at a prehistoric Iranian excavation site.

Saeedi is a board member of the Iranian Cultural Society of North Carolina and helps coordinate festivals and other events. These activities help bring the thriving North Carolina Persian community together. “The Persian community is very diverse – different people with different viewpoints and perspectives and ideological ways of thinking,” Saeedi says. “But there is a nice cohesion in the community.”

When Saeedi moved to North Carolina, it was a community in which she almost instantly felt at home. “I feel like I have friends here that I’ve known for so many years, but I’ve only been in North Carolina for two years now,” she says. “The friends that I have around me, I feel like I’ve known them for my whole life. I feel like a part of an extended family in the Persian community.”

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CAROLINA CONNECTIONS

MEHDI EMAMIAN

President of the Iranian Cultural Society of North Carolina

A small Persian carpet hangs in a frame on the wall of Mehdi Emamian's Chapel Hill home. It shows a young Kurdish woman, standing next to a samovar, a metal pot used for boiling water for tea. The carpet comes from Kurdistan, the western region of Iran where Emamian was born. The image is a common one for Persian carpets in Iran and reminds him of where he grew up. It reminds him of something else, too: "The girl looks exactly like my second cousin," he says, laughing.

Persian carpets are just one of the many Iranian decorative arts. Pottery and weaving, sculptures and metalwork, painting and architecture and stone reliefs all date back thousands of years and continue to feature prominently in Iranian homes. "It is an integral part of Iranian culture," Emamian says. "In any house you go to in Iran, with no exception, there is at least one small Persian carpet, if not a few framed calligraphy pieces or paintings on the wall."

Emamian was raised in Kermanshah, located in the Zagros Mountains. He remembers meters of snow covering the mountains, sometimes as early as August. He used to walk through the city, much smaller back then, to visit his grandmother, his uncle, and his cousins. "I have fond memories of those days," he says.

But when the Islamic Revolution began in 1978, life changed. Emamian was a rising senior at a university in Tehran when all the schools were shut down. He decided to come to the United States to finish the rest of his engineering degree at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. "That was 40 years ago," he says. "I thought I would finish that in two years, and I thought by then things would calm down and I could go back. Unfortunately, I still hear bad news every day." Only a few of Emamian's family members were able to leave during the revolution. His brothers now live in the United States, but his mother, his sister, and most of his extended family are still in Iran.

After he graduated, Emamian moved to California, where he worked at Stanford University for five years. In 1988, the project he was working on was transferred to Duke University - he's been there ever since.

In his time in North Carolina, Emamian has become involved in the Triangle community and the local universities. In addition to being an engineer, he is also an advisor to the Graduate Student Association of Iranians at Duke, and he is a key supporter of the Persian Studies Program and the Carolina Center for the Study of the Middle East and Muslim Civilizations at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Both of his daughters attended Carolina. He currently serves as president of the Iranian Cultural Society of North Carolina, which celebrates Iranian traditions and identity and encourages cultural exchanges with other groups.

"As in other regions of the United States, minorities form a group - and Iranians of course were no exception - to get together on a regular basis, to have a voice, to let each other know of events to promote the Iranian culture," Emamian says. "It is important for many reasons, of course: one is to introduce our culture to others who are not familiar with it but would like to be ... and also to tell others that we're the same. We're the same as other Americans."

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CAROLINA CONNECTIONS

ROSE JACKSON '19

Peace, War, and Defense Major | Persian Studies Minor
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Rose Jackson was 13 years old when she found herself suddenly estranged from her Iranian heritage. That's when she was adopted by a family from North Carolina with no Persian ties, who raised her in a loving home, but one that was very different from the one she had known her whole life.

Born in Iran, Jackson came to the United States with her mother and sister in 2002, when she was five years old. There, they joined her father, who had left Iran several years earlier to pursue better economic opportunities. When Jackson was adopted, she lost the connections with extended family members in Iran. Jackson lived for the next several years with her adoptive family, celebrating Christian holidays rather than familiar ones such as Nowruz, the Persian New Year.

In 2015, Jackson started attending UNC-Chapel Hill as an undergraduate student. It was at Carolina that she started exploring the Persian side of her identity again, looking to reconnect with her culture of origin. "When I heard Farsi for the first time after hearing it almost exclusively in the beginning half of my life, and then not hearing it at all for a good six years... I felt like I was coming back home," she says.

Through her Farsi classes, Jackson began reestablishing a Persian network. She became friends with Persian students whose families helped her connect with some of the social aspects of Persian culture. She joined the Persian Cultural Society, an organization at UNC-Chapel Hill that hosts community events. "It's a very strong, close-knit community," Jackson says. "It's one of the best parts of being at UNC, just having access to all these people who want to celebrate Persian culture."

Jackson's adoptive parents have been highly supportive of her efforts to reconnect with her heritage. Her mom, a now-retired nurse, and her dad, a teacher, are always excited to tell Jackson when they encounter someone from Iran in their work. "They are always eager to learn more about Persian culture," Jackson says. "They tried to cook Persian food, Tahdig, a few times—but it's harder than it looks."

Today, Jackson continues to embrace her Persian culture through music, literature, history, and art. "Design and decorative arts are a big part of the Persian identity," she says. "Any time you go to a Persian person's house, you always see the Persian rugs, and those themselves are pieces of decoration. Each symbol has a unique meaning and tells a story."

Jackson has her own tapestry in her Chapel Hill apartment, as well as a traditional Persian symbol that she wears on a necklace every day, both of which were purchased online. Though the pieces might not have been passed down through generations, where she found them isn't as important to Jackson as the connection they provide to her Persian heritage. "Learning the history makes me feel connected to the greater heritage. It's always a source of strength and inspiration for me," she says.

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