

‘Why did you return?’: North-South Return Migration and Family Ties in the Case of Iran

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Abstract

This article offers insight into the motivations behind voluntary North-South return migration by examining returnees’ own understanding and perception of return. Adopting a bottom-up approach and drawing on semi-structured in-depth interviews with eleven Iranian returnees, this study asks: How do return migrants perceive and articulate what motivated and facilitated their return from a prosperous country in the Global North to the challenging living conditions of their home country in the Global South? How do they explain the role of their stay-behind families in shaping their return migration trajectory? Informed by social network theory, this article showcases the agency of North-South return migrants as active social actors in the process, wherein their return is shaped by transnational relationships, particularly family ties, regardless of the context of return. Family ties act as a driving force of return migration not only when stay-behind families provide emotional and practical support to return migrants but also when migrants feel a sense of duty towards family members who have remained in the homeland and may need their care. This study contributes to scholarship on return migration by undertaking a critical examination of return migration theories grounded in economic models. In the study of voluntary return migration, scholars have focused significant attention on the economic push and pull factors informed by the rational choice theory. The economic models, however, do not fully explain the seemingly puzzling North-South return cases where migrants participate in return migration from a prosperous country to an economically adverse context of their homeland. This study highlights the role of family ties in return migration process and challenges the dichotomous success-failure narrative about return.

Keywords: Return migration, North-South return, family ties, homeland, Iran

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A vignette: To return or not to return?

It was May 8th, 2018, and I was flying from Istanbul to Tehran when then-President Trump was anticipated to make an announcement regarding his decision on whether the United States remain in or withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal. This was major news for the Iranian people as the devastating economic consequences of the US withdrawal from the deal were crystal clear. It was frustrating to be kilometers above the ground with no Internet connection when such a major announcement was scheduled. As someone who had emigrated from Iran to Canada a few years earlier, I was going back to Iran to visit my family and conduct research on a question that had been perplexing me: why do Iranian immigrants return to Iran despite its deteriorating living conditions?

On the plane, most passengers were Iranians, and I couldn't help but wonder if any of them were return migrants. I overheard a group of young Iranians in the front row chatting cheerfully about their trip to Türkiye, a visa-free neighboring country that many Iranians desire to visit, where they can escape the strict dress code that the Iranian regime enforces and freely enjoy their time at the beaches and nightclubs.

As the pilot instructed, I turned my phone off before the takeoff, eagerly waiting for landing to connect to the Internet and find out what would happen with the Iran nuclear deal. Once we reached the airspace above Tehran, however, some passengers turned on their phones and connected to the Internet to check the news. A young woman became the first reporter: "He pulled out of it, damn!" Another passenger confirmed her report, and a distressed voice followed: "Darn it! I knew he would do that. What's next? War?"

The mood on the plane quickly shifted from cheerful to anxious, and a few moments of silence were broken by dark humor, which Iranians seem to have collectively honed over time to deal with turmoil in the country. "Let's ask the pilot not to land! We should all go back to Türkiye and seek asylum!" one person said jokingly. Another added, "Who's carrying American dollars? I'm buying!" Some nervously laughed, but it was evident that the Iranian currency would crash following the news.

Leaving the plane, I saw a member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) standing at the end of the passenger boarding bridge, ensuring everyone complied with the mandatory dress code. I quickly took a wrinkled scarf from my backpack to cover my hair and nervously walked past him. As I entered my beloved homeland, I felt a mix of feelings: joy and excitement at seeing my family after a few years, combined with worry and sadness about Iran's continually deteriorating living conditions. The question that had been puzzling me for a while haunted me once again: why do Iranian migrants voluntarily return despite the challenging living conditions in the country?

Introduction

Scholars of return migration have traditionally focused on economic cost-benefit analyses of return. The economic model, which is informed by the rational choice theory, views the movement of individuals in terms of their pursuit of a more promising future based on utility maximization (Borjas 1989; Galor/Stark 1990; Taylor 1996). In this context, return migration is

conceptualized as a rational decision-making process undertaken by individuals, often with the aim of maximizing their financial gains. Accordingly, individuals choose to return to their home country after acquiring valuable human and economic capital, which can be effectively leveraged within the context of their homeland. This understanding of return, however, does not fully explain the complex dynamics that characterize North-South return migration, particularly the return migration cases to an economically challenging context. As such, it remains unclear why some migrants, having undergone the often costly and time-consuming process of immigration and having resided in prosperous countries in the Global North, decide to return to their home countries, such as Iran, in the Global South with challenging social, political, and economic circumstances. As a multi-faceted phenomenon, North-South return migration requires an investigation of various aspects of migrant lives, which includes not only economic aspects but also, and notably, family relations and ties.

Moreover, a predominant focus in the study of return migration has been on the state-centric and top-down approach, which involves analyzing the return process within the context of international paradigms (Long 2013; Scalettaris 2013; Stepputat 1999). While this approach has generated valuable knowledge about the nuanced nature of return migration, it does not provide a complete understanding of this complex phenomenon. Adopting a bottom-up approach in the investigation and analysis of return migration, on the other hand, holds the potential to shed light on the complexities and nuances that underpin return migration movements, particularly in the context of seemingly puzzling North-South return migration cases. By examining the motivations, experiences, and perceptions of North-South return migrants, a bottom-up approach can offer an in-depth comprehension of the various factors at play in the decision-making processes and the realities faced upon return. This approach recognizes the agency of return migrants as active social actors and considers their unique perspectives, social networks, and personal circumstances that shape their return migration trajectories. Consequently, it enables researchers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics, challenges, and opportunities associated with North-South return migration, contributing to a more holistic knowledge base in migration studies.

Drawing on empirical data from my research on Iranian return migrants, this article presents a nuanced perspective on North-South return migration by examining the firsthand experiences of return migrants. It delves into their personal accounts, shedding light on their individual migration trajectories and the personal meanings they attribute to their return migration journey. I assert that the decision-making processes of return migrants are more complex and culturally diverse to be fully explained by economic models based on cost-benefit analyses and a top-down approach. To capture such complexity and diversity, this article adopts a bottom-up approach and places the narratives, perspectives, and understandings of migrants at its center. Hence, I ask the following questions: How do return migrants perceive and articulate what motivated and facilitated their return from a prosperous Global North country to the challenging living conditions of their home country in the Global South? How do they explain the role of their families in the homeland in shaping their return migration trajectory? Informed by social network theory, this article highlights the agency exhibited by North-South return migrants and underscores the central role of transnational relationships, particularly family ties, in shaping migrants' decision to return, even when confronted with challenging

living conditions in their homeland. Moreover, this study not only emphasizes the significance of home countries in the Global South for migrants but also aligns itself with the principles of critical geopolitics. Informed by Edward Said's influential concept of Orientalism (1978), it offers a critique of the prevailing Orientalist narrative that portrays Global South countries as subordinate to their Global North counterparts.

The economic models of return migration

Migration scholars have studied return migration through various theoretical approaches. Some of these theories are primarily based on economic cost-benefit analyses influenced by the push and pull factors of the global market and the neoliberal framework. For example, the neoclassical economics theory considers the anticipated higher earnings in the host countries compared to the home countries as well as the achievement of permanent settlement and family reunification in the host countries (Cassarino 2004; Constant/Massey 2002; King/Kuschminder 2022; Todaro 1969). As such, return migration is seen as a result of migrants' failure to achieve the expected advantages abroad (Cassarino 2004; Constant/Massey 2002). This theory adopts a deterministic approach, focuses on the macro-level economic factors such as income differences between home and host countries, and overlooks the diverse experiences of individual return migrants (Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino and Taylor 1993; Portes/Rumbaut 2014).

On the other hand, the theory of new economics of labour migration understands return as a phenomenon dependent on the accumulation of savings and the achievement of migrants' objectives in host societies (Cassarino 2004; Constant/Massey 2002; King/Kuschminder 2022; Taylor 1996). Informed by rational choice theory, this framework views return migration as a rational decision made by migrants based on a cost-benefit analysis and, hence, a sign of an economically successful migration experience (Constant/Massey 2002). This theory, however, oversimplifies the complex decision-making processes that return migrants undergo and overlooks the non-economic factors that influence migrants' decisions to return, including the role of migrants' social, cultural, and emotional ties to their homelands.

In these theories, return migration is oversimplified as a binary assessment of either failure or success of the initial migration. However, the success and failure defined in these theories ignore the social context in which return occurs (Cassarino 2004; Paul 2022) and may not match the migrants' perception of success and failure in their migration trajectory. As these theories often adopt a top-down approach, they overlook migrants' own understanding and perception of their return migration trajectory. An inquiry may arise regarding whether return migrants understand their return migration trajectory within the framework of a dichotomous narrative of either success or failure. The dichotomous approach to the understanding of return migration also leads to a focus on the migrant's experiences overseas as the sole cause for their decision to return, disregarding the multifaceted and complex nature of the return migration experience shaped by migrants' agency and their transnational social connections (Portes/Rumbaut 2014; Massey et al. 1993). Moreover, from the perspective of these theories, return migration from a prosperous country in the Global North to a home country in the

Global South with challenging socioeconomic and political conditions may appear atypical and perplexing.

Migrants dwell within a transnational social field (Levitt/Glick Schiller 2004) and maintain social, cultural, political, and economic connections that transcend national boundaries, particularly in today's globalized world where technological advancements in communication and transportation have made it possible for individuals, families, and communities to stay in touch despite often vast geographical distances. Migrant lives are now deeply embedded in a cross-border network of relationships, influencing their decisions about returning to their home country. While acknowledging that the socioeconomic conditions in the host society can play a decisive role in the decision to return (Constant/Massey 2002), this study places particular emphasis on the impact of families who stay in the home country. These stay-behind families are pivotal in shaping return migration trajectories.

Social network theory and family ties in return migration

Among the theories of return migration, social network theory draws specific attention to strong cross-border ties in the decision-making processes of migrants (Boyd 1989; Massey et al. 1993; Ryan, Sales, Tilki and Siara 2008). According to this theory, social ties and relationships play a pivotal role in return migration process. It emphasizes that social connections, such as family ties, influence migrants' decision to return and their experiences and outcomes. Social networks can provide valuable information, emotional support, and material resources to migrants in their emigration, settlement, and return migration processes. Among various social networks, connections to family members in the home country influence various aspects of the decision to return. The influence of family ties in return migration can vary depending on cultural norms and individual circumstances.

Among various types of social networks, this study focuses on the role of family ties. In DaVanzo's (1981) term, family ties serve as "location-specific capital," which implies that their emotional and practical support is linked to a particular location (the homeland) and cannot be easily transferred to a new location (the hostland). Family members in the home country can function as a safety net for return migrants and, thus, facilitate the process of return migration. Such social connections may encourage return and make it possible by serving as sources of information, emotional support, and practical assistance to help return migrants resettle in their home country (Boccagni 2015; Boyd 1989).

In addition to their role in facilitating return migration by providing support to returning migrants, families can also serve as a motivation for return because family ties may create a sense of duty and responsibility towards family members (such as elderly parents) who have remained in the home country (Boyd 1989; Boccagni 2015). As such, the function of care as a binding agent that interconnects the lives of family members is intricately linked to the culturally informed sense of obligation and commitment of individual members to family connection and caregiving (Kilkey/Palenga-Möllenbeck 2016). As research on social relationships demonstrates, relationships with family members often considerably differ from those with friends, acquaintances, and colleagues because family relationships are inherent and

tend to remain essential parts of social networks regardless of geographical distance and passage of time (Silverstein/Bengtson 1997; Mulder 2018). Therefore, the decision to return to one's home country can be driven by a feeling of duty to family members residing there. Once back in their home country, return migrants can serve as a crucial source of social, emotional, and economic assistance for family members in the home country. Hence, family ties can play a central role in not only motivating return migration but also in promoting social cohesion and support networks in the home country.

By integrating relationality into the field of migration studies, social network theory considers that return migration is not merely an individual's personal choice but a decision shaped by the social group to which return migrants belong as well as the social context in which they are situated (Boccagni 2015; Boyd 1989; Massey et al. 1993). Social network theory highlights the notion of "linked lives" (Elder 1994), which pertains to the interconnectedness of human lives within social relationships (Mulder 2018). As such, the migrants' intention to return is not solely shaped by individual rational choice and economic cost-benefit calculations but also – and indeed centrally – by families as a geographically dispersed social group (Boyd 1989). In these family networks, social norms such as upholding familial responsibility, obligation, and emotional connections are created and maintained, which can influence and motivate return (Boyd 1989; Boccagni 2015). This point can be seen in an empirical study on the return migration intentions among Moroccan migrants in Europe by de Haas and his associates (2015), who demonstrate that migrants' labor market integration in the host country does not have a significant impact on their return migration decisions, but a sense of attachment and belonging to their home country is positively related to their return migration intentions.

The puzzle of return migration to Iran

Iranians have experienced various social, political, and economic challenges since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Right after the revolution, the prolonged Iran-Iraq war of 1980 to 1988, coupled with politico-economic sanctions by several countries, most importantly the United States, devastated the economy and left long-lasting, adverse impacts on the country. In recent years, Iran has experienced a rapid economic decline driven by various domestic and international factors. Issues such as drought, widespread corruption, and new sets of economic sanctions have led to the continuous devaluation of the Iranian rial and further devastation of the national economy (The World Bank 2021). Moreover, the establishment of an authoritarian and theocratic regime following the revolution has led to the imposition of socio-political pressures on the Iranian population (Arjomand 1988; Keshavarzian 2005). These pressures include mandatory dress codes and the suppression of social and political activism deemed "anti-revolutionary" (Banuazizi 1994; Shahrokni 2020). These restrictive measures, coupled with economic instability, have contributed to the growing desire among Iranians to seek opportunities abroad, primarily in countries in the Global North, including the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Germany (Iran Migration Outlook 2022).

Despite the apparent deteriorating living conditions in the country, however, there are Iranians who, after going through the often time-consuming and resource-intensive process of emigration and after living in countries with stable socioeconomic and political conditions,

mainly in the Global North, voluntarily return to Iran. According to the Iran Migration Outlook (2022), in the two years prior to this research, in 2016 and 2017, 6600 Iranian migrants returned to Iran as part of the assisted voluntary return. However, there is a lack of statistics regarding the account of independent voluntary returns to Iran.

I contend that the voluntary return of Iranians is a puzzling case because of the seemingly socially, politically, and economically undesirable contexts of return. To understand how return migrants understand the voluntary return migration that brought them back to Iran from a prosperous country in the Global North, this article investigates the ways in which Iranian return migrants perceive, contemplate, and articulate their return migration trajectory and the meanings they attach to their decision to return. Specifically, it examines their narratives about their families in Iran and the role of family ties in shaping their understanding and decision-making processes of return.

Previous research on return migration to Iran is scarce. The few studies conducted on the case of Iran, similar to general scholarship on return migration, focus mainly on the living conditions of Iranian migrants in the host society and the issue of integration, particularly in the labor market (Adibi 2006; Klinthall 2007). The role of family ties, while mentioned in these studies, is overshadowed by the economic cost-benefit analysis of return. Moreover, the dichotomous narrative of success and failure in regard to integration and return is prominent in these studies. In this article, however, I attempt to bring the role of family ties to the forefront. I assert that return migration is contextual and needs to be understood in light of the cultural context of the group under study. In the communal culture of Iran, family ties play a foundational role in migrants' decision-making processes. As such, I highlight the importance of family ties in motivating return migration to Iran regardless of the economic cost-benefit calculations.

Method

In this article, I draw on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with eleven Iranian return migrants. The interviews were conducted in the summer of 2018 in Tehran, Iran. I used my social network in Iran and Canada to recruit participants through snowball sampling. The participants consisted of five women and six men ranging from ages 30 to 75. They were skilled migrants from a middle-class background, with at least a bachelor's degree before emigrating from Iran. Their educational background consisted of engineering (eight participants), education (two participants), and architecture (one participant). They all had legally emigrated from and legally returned to Iran. I have adopted Erdal's (2017) definition of return migration, which characterizes return as "the movement of migrants back to a country of origin, following an absence of at least one year" (Erdal: 104). Accordingly, the participants resided for at least one year in countries in the Global North, including Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, and the United States, and voluntarily returned to Iran at least one year before the time of the interviews.

I met the participants at their places of choice, in cafés, at their homes, or at their workplaces. Interviews were between one to two hours long. I conducted the interviews in the Persian

language, and for security concerns raised by the University of Calgary's Ethics Board (explained further below), I only took notes of the interviews and wrote down quotes that seemed central to the participants' accounts of return. I consulted participants' lived experiences of emigration, immigration, and return migration and paid extensive attention to the ways in which they articulated their return migration experience and their reasons for return. I utilized narrative analysis to interpret and analyze participants' narratives (Riessman 1993). As such, I examined the content of their accounts to identify themes, meanings, and patterns to better understand how they made sense of their seemingly puzzling return migration trajectory from a prosperous country in the Global North to the adverse living context of their home country. Informed by their narratives, it becomes evident that family ties play a pivotal role in driving their decision to return to Iran. I translated the interview notes and selected quotes from Persian to English. Due to translation, the quotes from these interviews do not represent the verbatim responses of the participants.

My positionality as an Iranian immigrant residing in Canada placed me in a distinct and nuanced relationship with my interlocutors, thereby potentially creating mutual comprehension of migration experiences. The fact that I conducted interviews in Iran further deepened my connection to the interviewees, as I shared with them my own ruminations on the prospect of returning. My proficiency in the Persian language, native familiarity with sociopolitical and economic conditions in Iran, and firsthand experience as an immigrant functioned as critical conduits for establishing rapport and engendering trust with the participants. It is worth noting that the purpose of using a small sample size is not to create generalizable claims but rather to generate unique case studies that exemplify the complexity and diversity of a given phenomenon (Baker/Edwards 2017). Hence, as a "small N" qualitative study, this research provides a subjective understanding of return migration and the personal significance that return migrants attribute to their return migration trajectory.

Navigating challenges in conducting the study

As mentioned in the opening vignette, I arrived in Iran to conduct my research on May 8th, 2018, which was the day that the United States withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal, causing a state of anxiety and panic in the country. The withdrawal from the deal meant significant economic and socio-political impacts on the people of Iran. Since the beginning of my data collection, when I told my family and friends about my research on return migration to Iran, I received warnings from them about the sensitivity of the topic, particularly from the perspective of the regime in Iran. My insistence that the research was not about leaving Iran but returning to the country did not seem convincing to anyone. Additionally, conducting research in Iran while affiliating with a Western university (at the time, the University of Calgary) could raise suspicion. Warnings from my family and friends were further reinforced by an alarming email from the University of Calgary's Ethics Board a few days after my arrival in Iran. The email cautioned me about the possible risks of being arrested by the Iranian regime due to my dual citizenship in Iran and Canada. The email read:

There is currently an arbitrary crackdown by the Iranian government on the Iranians who hold dual citizenship [...] I appreciate, though, that this is probably not an ethics-

related issue per se, but something for the researcher to be aware of while planning things.

Eventually, the warnings convinced me to become more cautious when recruiting participants, so I restricted my selection to individuals within my closer social circle. These warnings also made me opt to take written notes during the interviews instead of recording them.

Another challenge I faced while conducting this research in Iran was the regime's censorship of the Internet. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter were blocked in Iran, leading many Iranians to resort to instant messaging apps like Telegram to keep connections. Given its widespread use at the time, I planned to use Telegram to recruit and communicate with potential participants. However, the Iranian regime blocked its access just days before my arrival in the country. This made it more difficult for me to access potential participants. Despite the challenges I encountered, I was fortunate to have a reliable social network in Iran that helped me recruit participants who were willing to meet with me and share their return migration stories candidly.

"Why did you return?": Not a puzzling but a frustrating question

When I asked Kian why he returned, his frustration was evident. Kian, a 42-year-old engineer, left Iran after the Iranian Green Movement – a political movement that arose after the 2009 Iranian presidential election and was brutally suppressed. A graduate from a prestigious university in Tehran, he felt he was missing out when seeing his classmates applying to top Western universities not only to continue their education but also because a student visa was often the easiest and cheapest way to emigrate from Iran. Kian told me: "I was a student at an internationally well-known university, and around that time (the Green Movement), most of my fellow classmates were talking about immigration and getting student visas from MIT or Harvard. I didn't want to miss out." Kian spent two years completing his graduate studies at a university in the Netherlands, and after his graduation, he decided to return to Iran.

As per his request, Kian and I met in a cozy café situated adjacent to the beautifully landscaped Gisha Park, located in the northwestern region of Tehran, on a hot summer day. Though we had been looking forward to chatting in an air-conditioned café, the power went out as soon as we stepped inside. As expected, we began discussing the frequent power outages that Tehranis were experiencing that summer. Kian explained how such outages in big cities like Tehran were utilized by the city to ration power generation and consumption in light of the drought and the limited water volume behind the country's dams. Our conversation soon veered towards the country's economic situation in the aftermath of the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal. When Kian expressed his concerns about the country's economy and its future, I seized the opportunity to pose the question as to why Kian had opted to return to Iran despite expressing concerns regarding the future of the country. He paused for a moment and, with a bitter smile and a softer tone, responded:

I keep getting this question! The inquiries about my return range from blunt statements such as 'Are you stupid?' to desperate pleas for an explanation like 'We are desperately trying to leave, and you return?' Frankly, it's frustrating that I am expected to provide a rational and convincing justification for my decision to return.

While I could try to come up with a list of seemingly rational reasons for my return, none of which, however, would reflect the truth behind my decision. I wish I could simply answer the question with the most honest response: I just came back. Period.

Upon their return to Iran from a prosperous country in the Global North, Iranian return migrants often encounter inquiries about why they returned. This question is commonplace and expected, given the perception that leaving Iran for a prosperous country in the Global North represents a “golden opportunity” (*forsat-e talai*) that no rational person would squander. While the topic of return elicits confusion for non-migrants, it is often a frustrating topic for the return migrants who feel compelled to provide, as an Iranian return migrant noted, “rational” reasons, informed by financial cost-benefit calculations, for their seemingly incomprehensible decision to return to Iran.

In 2010, Mahsa, an engineer and mother of two, emigrated from Iran with her husband and children to live in Canada. Like Kian, she saw immigration as a “golden opportunity” to achieve a better life in a prosperous country in the Global North and did not want to miss the chance. She also expressed concern for her children’s future and wanted to provide them with “the best opportunities on the planet.” However, after two years in Canada, Mahsa and her husband decided to return to Iran. When I asked why she left the perceived “golden opportunity” of living in Canada and returned to Iran along with her family, she, with a frustrated tone, told me:

We, Iranians, think the West (kharej) is heaven, and living there is going to be like living in heaven! Well, let me tell you that it is not! Whatever they have there, we have better of it here in Iran.

Mahsa’s statement reveals a level of frustration toward the inquiry about her return. Her idealized image of the homeland stood alongside her critique of the romanticized vision of the “West” and demonstrated a different approach to answering inquiries about return. Unlike Kian, who wished not to provide any rational reasons for his return, Mahsa attempted to challenge (and even reject) the assumption held by non-migrants that living in the West is a golden opportunity and a “heaven-like” experience. Given that Mahsa was only away from Iran for two years, she was well aware of the sociopolitical and economic turmoil in Iran. Nonetheless, she felt obliged to provide a seemingly “rational reason” for her return that would align with the non-migrants’ expectation of a cost-benefit calculation.

Tumaj, a 35-year-old educator, lived in France for seven years before returning to Iran. He had a distractingly long moustache reminiscent of the leftists of the Revolution era in the 1970s – a look now considered hipster in contemporary Iran. He told me that he left with no specific plans for returning, but after a few years abroad, returning seemed inevitable to him. Tumaj perplexed me with his response when I asked why he returned; he confidently probed: “Shouldn’t the focus of inquiry be on leaving your homeland rather than on returning to your homeland, to your family and loved ones?” According to Tumaj, the act of returning was both an inevitable and natural occurrence, whereas emigration warranted closer examination.

Tumaj’s explanation for why he returned to his homeland highlights anticipation of returning regardless of the circumstances surrounding the context of return. Tumaj did not consider the “rational” cost-benefit analysis relevant to his decision to return to his homeland.

His response reflects a challenge to my approach to the topic of inquiry, as it shifts the focus from questioning the act of returning to the importance and value of returning to the homeland where one feels a sense of belonging. Tumaj's objection underscores my underlying assumption (and the assumption of broader migration scholarship shaped by the economic model) that return to a challenging context is an atypical and even puzzling phenomenon that warrants further investigation and needs explanation by the return migrants.

In retrospect, the phrasing of the inquiry as 'Why did you return?' may appear inquisitorial and judgemental, despite its potential for generating valuable information by prompting return migrants to explain their stories of return. Iranian return migrants often feel obligated to justify why they opted to abandon the opportunity of living in a more socially, politically, and economically stable country in the Global North to return to Iran. However, according to their narratives, returning is a natural course of action that reflects their sense of belonging to their homeland and what it represents. Kian's frustration, Mahsa's idealization, and Tumaj's challenge toward the question exemplify the yearning among return migrants to perceive return as a normal, understandable, and even anticipated occurrence rather than an irrational and perplexing phenomenon.

The role of family ties in returning to Iran

In response to why they returned, the Iranian return migrants spoke about their stay-behind families as a decisive factor that motivated their return to Iran. As per their narratives, family ties play a major role in the return migration decisions of migrants who have established families in their home countries. These ties serve as a powerful motivator for return, given that family members are often regarded as pillars of support within the home country, providing invaluable guidance and assistance which is not easily available overseas. Moreover, the presence of family members upon return can help mitigate the economic challenges that frequently confront return migrants to home countries such as Iran. However, family ties do not only act as a driving force of return for the emotional and practical support provided by the stay-behind families but also when migrants feel a sense of duty towards family members who have remained in the homeland and may need their care. Through the following narratives, we can observe how the rationale for the seemingly puzzling return of the Iranian migrants appears to be a sense of responsibility and obligation toward their family members.

Returning for family support in the homeland

It was a hot summer day in 2018 when I met Kaveh, a 32-year-old engineer who had returned to Iran after living in Canada for two years. I visited him in his office in a government building in Tehran. After navigating through a few corridors, I finally found Kaveh's office. He was sitting behind a wooden desk in a large office which had a window opening toward the beautiful Alborz mountains. He offered me tea as we sat at a table in the middle of the room. Curious about Kaveh's position, I asked about his job. He explained that his job was unrelated to his engineering education, but it was "an easy, well-paid job" that his father secured for him when he returned to Iran. Kaveh spoke at length about his struggles in Canada and shared his

experience with loneliness and depression as an immigrant. As he was reflecting on his experience, he said: “Nobody was supporting me in difficult times.” These struggles motivated him to seek the support of his family back in Iran. Although he expressed his contentment about his decision to return, he said: “There is one thing that bothers me the most since I returned, and that is being asked why I returned.” Kaveh got married a year after returning to Iran, and his marriage was arranged by his family. He told me that he was expecting his first child and was happy to raise his child in his homeland, where he has the support of his family.

As immigrants, we often refrain from discussing the challenges we encounter and instead choose to focus on the rosy socioeconomic side of the story. Unfortunately, we tend not to share the emotional difficulties inherent in the immigrant experience and leave those who decide to embark on the journey themselves to discover the hardships firsthand. People may decide differently if they know the full story. And it is often the returnees who tell the full story.

This was the account of Jina, a 38-year-old woman who studied at an Ivy League institution in the United States and resided in Canada for two years before returning to Iran. Jina was fashionably matching the colour of her scarf with her long tunic when we met in a café located in the vicinity of the Alborz mountains. The expansive windows in front of our table afforded a remote perspective of Tehran. The metropolis, however, was barely visible due to the thick smog enveloping the urban skyline. The view encouraged us to start our conversation about the sociopolitical and economic challenges in Iran, particularly for women. As an academic with a prestigious degree from the United States, Jina was struggling to find a satisfactory job. We found each other critical of the establishment and the systemic discrimination against women, which Jina was experiencing firsthand when searching for a job. When the conversation moved to immigration and return, I asked Jina why she had returned despite the difficulties she was facing in the country. Jina referred to the challenges of migrant life and offered a critique of other migrants for their tendency to withhold a comprehensive portrayal of the migrant experience.

She recounted that her return was very much driven by her intense longing for her family. Jina went on to describe the deep sense of contentment she felt when she was in Iran, surrounded by the sights, sounds, and smells of “home.” She asserted that being in the company of her family and receiving their support daily was a source of profound happiness, one that she could not replicate elsewhere. Moreover, Jina expressed strong disagreement with people who equate her return with failure. Her return was a deliberate choice, as she assertively expressed:

Sometimes people erroneously assume that your return means that you failed. That’s not true! I realized that my happiness in life was tied to being in Iran, surrounded by my family and friends; so, I made a decision to return. The social, political, and economic difficulties in Iran and the opportunities of living in North America are no longer my primary concern. As a returnee, I know the value of family support.

The sentiment expressed by Jina about the irreplaceable feeling of happiness she experiences in Iran underscores the profound connection that migrants feel towards their stay-behind families. It also underscores the oversimplified portrayal of return in a dichotomous account of economic success or failure.

Hamed, a 35-year-old engineer, migrated to Australia to pursue his graduate studies and start a new life. Upon leaving Iran, he was certain that he “would never want to return.” He chose his university based on the information he found on the university’s website as well as some brochures. Upon his arrival, however, he realized that his anticipation of the place was far from the reality he faced. He was unhappy about his program, struggled with culture shock, and, most of all, missed the support of his family in Iran. He felt so unhappy and lonely that he ultimately decided to return to Iran before completing his degree. He asserted that he was disappointed about the sociopolitical, economic, and environmental issues in Iran and emphasized that if it weren’t for his family (his parents and only sibling), he would have dealt with the challenges of migrant life and never returned to the country. After returning, Hamed stayed with his family, who provided him with support in finding a job and restarting his life in his homeland. His strong regard for his family and his longing for their support brought him back despite his unhappiness about the living conditions in the homeland.

Sediqueh, a 38-year-old engineer, made the decision to migrate to Canada while her husband opted to stay in Iran. Sediqueh’s husband was concerned about losing his job as an engineer because of emigration and wished to stay close to his elderly parents in Iran. Sediqueh, on the other hand, who was unhappy about the sociopolitical conditions in Iran, especially the systemic discrimination against women, decided to pursue her studies at a college in Vancouver. Nonetheless, it did not take long for her to feel lonely and isolated while struggling with the high cost of living in Vancouver. Sediqueh told me: “It was very difficult for me to live there by myself. I wanted my husband to be there with me. So, I decided to go back.” While she expressed satisfaction with her return, she emphasized that if she were to migrate again, she would only do so with her husband at her side.

Returning to support family members in the homeland

Omid, a 37-year-old entrepreneur, lived in Germany before returning to Iran. I met Omid in a large office at his workplace in Tehran in the summer of 2018. He told me in length about the limited opportunities and financial disappointments he faced as a young, educated man in Iran, which seemed to be the main contributing factors that motivated him to emigrate from Iran. Building on the seemingly convincing reasons he mentioned for his immigration, I questioned his return. He then told me:

Immigration is difficult. For every single thing you achieve abroad, you lose something precious in your personal life you can only have in your country [...] you get disconnected from your friends and what gives you a sense of purpose in life. This is what makes immigration difficult the most.

Omid’s statement piqued my curiosity, and hence, I probed him to give me examples of the precious things that provide him with a purpose and are only available in his home country. That was when he asked us to move to a quiet next-door office where we could continue our conversation without being interrupted by his colleagues (who were entering the office for various reasons) during the interview. Omid’s voice sounded less assertive and more emotional in the new room, which felt cozier than the previous one. He then revealed a personal aspect of his family life that shaped his migration trajectory. He told me:

To be honest with you, I have a sister with special needs whom I wanted to support the most. My parents were separating, and I planned to bring my sister to Germany as a refugee, which seemed to be the only option available for them to join me there [...] I always wished for a better life for her, a better social life. I believed my sister would have been better off in Germany. But she finally decided that she wanted to stay in Iran [...] You know, my sister was the main reason I left Iran, and she was the main reason that brought me back.

If Omid's financial motive and professional aspirations (rational choices) were the main motivators of his decision to emigrate, going back to Iran would jeopardize them. However, another deeper motivation was in play in Omid's migration journey. His strong sense of responsibility and affect towards his sister shaped his decision to leave Iran in an attempt to pave the way for his sister to join him in a country that, he believed, could provide her with better living conditions. And the same sense of responsibility and affect brought Omid back to Iran when he realized his mother and sister did not wish to live abroad. Furthermore, Omid's story highlights that gender influences decisions about migration movements and settlement. As his parents were separating, Omid, as the oldest son in the family, took on the role of a supportive "father" to take care of his sister, who needed his support.

When moving to the United States right before the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Khodanur was not sure he would ever return to Iran again after the establishment of the Islamic Republic. However, he returned after living in the United States for 30 years. When we met at his friend's home in Northwestern Tehran, he enthusiastically introduced himself as "a 70-year-old who had returned to Iran after living in the United States for three decades." Khodanur immigrated to the United States to continue his graduate studies in the United States. After earning his doctorate in education, he stayed in the United States, worked, and raised his family. Khodanur seemed enthusiastic about sharing his story of return which occurred a decade prior to the interview. Assuredly, he told me why he left his life in the United States and returned to Iran:

I came back after three decades to take care of my ageing parents. This was when my only sibling, who was looking after them, passed away. My parents needed me; they needed my presence and attention. I returned to my parents; I returned to care.

Despite living abroad for three decades, Khodanur's continued sense of responsibility, affection, and care for his parents is a testament to the enduring nature of migrants' ties to their stay-behind families. Khodanur's unwavering commitment to his family played a significant role in maintaining his connection to them despite the long separation. Specifically, in the Iranian culture, it is considered a noble duty to care for elderly parents, which can act as a motivating factor in the decision to return to the homeland to look after stay-behind aging parents. Moreover, for return migrants like Khodanur, the sense of responsibility to provide care for parents is strong enough to overcome the advantages of staying in a prosperous country like the United States. As such, taking care of elderly parents can provide a sense of purpose and meaning in life, and hence, it may become more important than the individual financial benefits that can be obtained from living abroad.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has investigated the case of Iranian return migrants to gain a subjective understanding of North-South return migration and to underscore the significance that returnees attach to their return migration trajectory. The primary objective has been to delve into the micro-level, notably focusing on how individual migrants understand and explain their voluntary North-South return migration. I argue that the predominant assumption that return migrants make decisions based on economic calculations of costs and benefits overlooks the complexity and diversity of migrants' decisions to return, particularly in cases where the context of return is not promising. The case of return migration to Iran highlights the important role of stay-behind families in encouraging and facilitating return and underscores the agentic character of migrants who actively participate in shaping their migration trajectory.

This article also illustrates that viewing return as a binary outcome, either a success or failure of a migration journey, is an oversimplified perspective. Perceiving return as a failure connotes that individuals who return do not accomplish their desired financial objectives and often cannot integrate into the economic fabric of their host society, ultimately resulting in a feeling of disappointment and "return of failure." On the other hand, the perception of return migration as a sign of economic success views return migrants as "rational" actors who make decisions solely based on cost-benefit calculations. These dichotomous perspectives, however, ignore non-economic motivators, neglect the centrality of family ties, and disregard cultural dimensions and diverse and complex experiences. The multidimensional nature of return migration calls for the inclusion of various experiences, motivations, and aspirations.

Specifically, examining how the family is perceived can offer valuable insight into return migration process. In cultures that prioritize more communal values, like Iran's communal culture, migrants often nurture and maintain strong ties with their family members in their home country, placing family at a higher priority in their lives. As such, in the narratives of Iranian return migrants, potential familial tensions are downplayed while the positive and supportive role of the family takes center stage. In addition, the notion of the individual in the rational choice theory, which is informed by the modernist framework of individualism, fails to account for the collective and family-informed decision-making processes that are particularly prevalent in communal cultures. Return migrants inhabit a transnational social field (Levitt/Glick Schiller 2004) and make decisions and take actions while maintaining their symbolic and material connections with their homelands, specifically with their stay-behind families. The narratives of the Iranian return migrants who participated in this study underscore the centrality of family ties in their decision-making processes of returning to the homeland regardless of its socioeconomic conditions.

Families serve as a social unit that, even when physically separated, establish networks of kinship which span across distances and endure over time. Family ties also shape the understanding of return migration and engender a sense of familial responsibility and emotional connection. Such understandings of return influence who decides to return and underline migrants' perceptions about their choice. As such, return migration is a contingent phenomenon in which family ties may play a central role. The narratives of Iranian return migrants highlight that the decision to return home is directly dependent on the ties between

migrants and their stay-behind families. While acknowledging the evolving sociopolitical landscape in Iran in the years following this study, particularly in light of the ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ movement, one could hypothesize that the notion of family reunion may strengthen in the face of exacerbated sociopolitical and economic hardship in the country. However, the direction of the migration flow might shift towards the movements of those who stayed behind to join their families abroad. Future research in this area will shed light on emerging shifts and dynamics.

Finally, the portrayal of countries in the Global North as attractive destinations in every conceivable aspect and the subsequent devaluation of homelands in the Global South as places of struggle to which migrants will not voluntarily return is a continuation of the Orientalist narrative. This depiction of the Global North is also situated within the modernist discourse informed by economic rationality, which underpins many theories of migration (Bakewell 2010). This perspective exhibits an alignment with the unequal geopolitical power dynamics between the Global South and Global North, which place the Southern homelands in a subordinate position and may contribute to anti-immigrant sentiments. In the narratives of the Iranian return migrants, specifically Mahsa, Kian, and Jina, we can also observe what is referred to as “internalized” or “self” Orientalism. In the context of this research, internalized Orientalism can be understood as the process through which individuals from countries in the Global South internalize the idea that Western countries are positioned at a higher rung of the hierarchy compared to the migrants’ home countries, portrayed as realms of absolute equality and land of opportunities for all. These narratives show how internalized Orientalism was challenged after migrants gained first-hand experience of life in the West, enabling them to make comparisons based on their own lived experiences. In an attempt to dispel the Orientalist narrative and modernist discourse and to find a more nuanced explanation for North-South return, this study has adopted a bottom-up approach in the investigation and analysis of return migration. As such, I assert that serious consideration of migrants’ own perceptions and perspectives regarding their values and priorities is crucial in order to explain the complexities and nuances that underpin migration movements, specifically North-South return migration.

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