A Study on Iranian Values
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The Simorgh Foundation

• The Simorgh Foundation is a private, apolitical, non-governmental and non-partisan international entity based in Vienna.

• Our aim is to encourage cultural and social exchange between countries and peoples, specifically starting with an exchange of thoughts and ideas between Iran and the European Union.

• Our goal is to create awareness, dialogue and understanding between peoples, cultures and organisations in order to develop, enhance and improve human development and communication.

• The Simorgh Foundation's founders are a group of Iranians based inside and outside Iran.
Agenda

• In search of identity – what does it mean to be an Iranian?

• Review of past studies on Iranian culture:
  – National Culture Value Orientations (Hofstede)
  – GLOBE Study
  – World Value Survey
  – Misc

• Presenting our study on Iranian culture (full version of the study and findings are on the website: www.thesimorgh.com)

• Next steps?
The Iranian Identity

• What is an Iranian?
• How is an Iranian different to an Arab? An American? A Palestinian? What is an American-Iranian? ...
• Culture is complex, we must be careful not to stereotype and recognise that each person has many different layers of culture (personal, national, institutional, societal, etc.) which shapes our cultural make-up/baggage.
Common Facts on the Iranian Culture and People

• Hospitable and friendly (importance of face and honour)

• Duality in private and public behaviour (survival, indirect communication, dishonesty)

• Nationalistic and proud people with ancient history (sense of superiority, xenophobia)

• Family oriented/collectivist (nepotism, low trust for out-group, relationship orientation)

• Appreciation for nature, poetry, art (indirect communication, feminine culture)

• Short term thinkers (lack of long term planning)

• Conspiracy minded and negative (not taking responsibility, lack of accountability)
Studies on Iranian Culture

• Dutchman, Geert Hofstede did a groundbreaking study on national culture values based on 116,000 employees in IBM.

• He found 4 general value orientations that all countries fell into:
  – Power Distance (Hierarchy/ Power)
  – Uncertainty Avoidance (Truth)
  – Individualism-Collectivism (Identity)
  – Masculinity-Femininity (Gender)

• The initial study was conducted in 1976 and later re-validated in 1988, adding a 5th national value.
  – Long/Short term orientation (Virtue)

• Iran was included in the initial study which compared 44 countries.
National Culture Value Orientations

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Definition

- **Power Distance**
  - The extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally.

- **Uncertainty Avoidance**
  - The extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations and have created beliefs and institutions that try to avoid these.

- **Masculinity-Femininity**
  - The fundamental issue here is what motivates people, wanting to be the best (masculine) or liking what you do (feminine).

- **Individualism-Collectivism**
  - The degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members.

- **Short term vs long term orientation**
  - The extent to which a society shows a pragmatic future-oriented perspective rather than a conventional historical short-term point of view.
For Iran, this means,

- Iran is a **high power distance country**. People accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place and which needs no further justification.

- Iran is a **collectivistic** society, one which maintains a close long-term commitment to the member 'group', be that a family, extended family, or extended relationships. Loyalty in a collectivist culture is paramount, and over-rides most other societal rules and regulations. **NOTE: more recent studies show Iran is more in-group collectivist and out-group individualistic.**

- Iran is a **relatively feminine society**. The dominant values in society are caring for others and quality of life. A feminine society is one where quality of life is the sign of success and standing out from the crowd is not admirable.

- Iran has a **high preference for avoiding uncertainty**. Countries exhibiting high uncertainty avoidance maintain rigid codes of belief and behaviour and are intolerant of unorthodox behaviour and ideas. In these cultures there is an emotional need for rules (even if the rules never seem to work).
Results from the GLOBE Study

• The results of the GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness) study (House et al., 2004), which examined 62 countries including Iran, show Iranian cultural practices to be characterized by:
  – Individualism,
  – Strong in-group collectivism,
  – High power distance,
  – High performance orientation and
  – High male orientation.

• The most distinguishing feature of the Iranian culture is its family and in-group orientation, which suggests loyalty and cohesiveness towards small groups such as family and close friends (Javidan and Dastmalchian, 2003).
Javidan and Dastmalchian (2003) also found:

• Iran is part of the **South Asian cultural cluster** consisting of such countries as India, Thailand, and Malaysia **NOT** the Arab cultural cluster.

• The country’s culture is distinguished by a mix of **strong family ties and connections** and a **high degree of individualism**.

• Societal or institutional collectivism is not a strong suit of Iranians. **Excessive privilege and status are given to people in positions of power and authority.**

This article was based on a sample of 300 Iranian middle managers from the banking, telecommunications, and food-processing industries as part of the GLOBE Project.
Other Studies on Iran


• Yasin et al., (2002).

• Ali and Amirshahi (2002).
Our Study

- Simorgh Foundation’s first study trying to identify trends in Iranian values:
  - Do we see new trends emerging in the past 10 years?
  - Do we see a different picture within and outside Iran?
  - Are our values changing over time/ generation/ location?
  - Are we proud to be Iranian? What makes us proud?
  - What is our role towards religion?
  - Who do we trust?

- Questionnaire was on-line, web based, in Persian, used different sites, social media and word of mouth

- 1,959 respondents completed the questionnaire, reliable data set

- Advantages were access to different groups of people both inside and outside Iran, confidentiality and anonymity

- Cross tabulations were done, only meaningful ones presented here.

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Demographics

Gender

Female: 37.0%

Male: 63.0%
Location

- Smaller cities: 9.0%
- Towns: 13.0%
- Other large cities: 26.0%
- Outside Iran: 16.0%
- Tehran: 36.0%
Social class

- Upper middle class: 52%
- Lower middle class: 36%
- Working class: 4%
- Lower class: 2%
- Upper class: 2%
- None: 4%
How proud are you to be an Iranian?

- Very proud
- Quite proud
- Not very proud
- Not at all proud
- Do not know
When asked why do you feel this way?

• The most frequently recorded words were:
  – Culture
  – History
  – Past
  – Country
  – People
  – Civilisation
For what achievement do you think Iran should be recognized?

- Success in mathematics and science Olympiads: 5.36
- Our past achievements in science, medicine, astrology: 5.37
- Literary achievements in poetry and literature: 5.65
- Film and music: 5.85
- Our role and impact on the entire region: 5.83
- Impact on Islamic world: 3.91
- Nuclear developments: 4.32
- Develop. in sci. & tech. over the past 30 yrs: 5.21
- Develop. in sci. & tech. of the Iranian diaspora: 5.63
- Iran does not have any achievements for which it should be recognized: 3.61
Where should we focus our general attention in helping other nations?

- The entire humanity: 80% (Outside Iran), 75% (Inside Iran)
- Our immediate neighbors: 17% (Outside Iran), 10% (Inside Iran)
- All Islamic countries and communities: 5% (Outside Iran), 5% (Inside Iran)
- Only Shiite countries and communities: 1% (Outside Iran), 2% (Inside Iran)
- Just Iran alone: 28% (Outside Iran), 24% (Inside Iran)
- Other: 6% (Outside Iran), 5% (Inside Iran)
What do you think Iran’s main goals in the next five years should be?

- Getting rid of sanctions
- Improving economic situation
- Improving healthcare
- Improving education
- Improving the quality of life
- Developing nuclear technology
- Political development

Legend:
- Blue: Total
- Black: Inside Iran
- Green: Outside Iran
What do you think Iran’s main goals in the next five years should be?

Respondents: Inside Iran

- Getting rid of sanctions: [Bar chart]
- Improving economic situation: [Bar chart]
- Improving healthcare: [Bar chart]
- Improving education: [Bar chart]
- Improving the quality of life: [Bar chart]
- Developing nuclear technology: [Bar chart]
- Political development: [Bar chart]
What do you think Iran’s main goals in the next five years should be?

Respondents: Inside Iran

- Getting rid of sanctions
- Improving economic situation
- Improving healthcare
- Improving education
- Improving the quality of life
- Developing nuclear technology
- Political development

**mean**

Total: 4.43
Upper class: 4.66
Lower class: 4.65

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How important is the following in your life?

- Friends
- Family
- Work
- Leisure time
- Religion
- Politics
How important is the following in your life?

- Friends
- Family
- Work
- Leisure time
- Religion
- Politics

Legend:
- Upper class
- Upper middle class
- Lower middle class
- Working class
- Lower class
Where do you think we learn values from?

- Wife/Husband
- Mother
- Father
- Other family members
- School
- University
- Friends
- Cultural products
- Radio & TV
- Internet
- Social media

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What values should children be encouraged to learn at home

Respondents: Inside Iran

- Independence
- Hard work
- Feeling of responsibility
- Creativity
- Tolerance and respect for other people
- Thrift, saving money, careful with spending
- Religious faith
- Determination, perseverance
- Obedience to elders
- Self expression
- Unselfishness, helping others before self
- Kindness

Children should be encouraged to learn at home
What would you consider a worthy occupation for your children

- Medical doctor: 357
- Engineer: 311
- University professor: 294
- Hold a university degree: 394
- Work in a governmental company: 61
- Self-employment: 182
- Work in a foreign company: 212
- Owns his/her own business: 593
- Earn a very high salary: 375
- Other: 413
What kind of person would you like to have as a neighbor?

- Your relative
- Educated
- Devout religious person
- Wealthy
- Very well connected to the govt
- A single woman or man
- Someone who consumes alcohol
- Not well educated but humble

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What qualities should a person you respect have?

Main qualities recorded are: Honesty, Kindness, Ethical Behavior and Compassion
Would you say that most people can be trusted?

- Most people can be trusted: 12% Inside Iran, 23% Outside Iran
- Need to be very careful in dealing with people: 63% Inside Iran, 77% Outside Iran
- Only family members and known people can be trusted: 5% Inside Iran, 6% Outside Iran
- Do not know: 8% Inside Iran, 6% Outside Iran
Would you say that most people can be trusted?

- Most people can be trusted: 10 Men, 16 Women
- Need to be very careful in dealing with people: 72 Men, 78 Women
- Only family members and known people can be trusted: 5 Men, 6 Women
- Do not know: 7 Men, 5 Women
Would you say that most people can be trusted?

- Most people can be trusted:
  - Upper class: 3
  - Upper middle class: 13
  - Lower middle class: 14
  - Working class: 16
  - Lower class: 15
  - Total: 73

- Need to be very careful in dealing with people:
  - Upper class: 70
  - Upper middle class: 76
  - Lower middle class: 75
  - Working class: 70
  - Lower class: 65
  - Total: 73

- Only family members and known people can be trusted:
  - Upper class: 9
  - Upper middle class: 9
  - Lower middle class: 9
  - Working class: 15
  - Lower class: 5
  - Total: 15

- Do not know:
  - Upper class: 9
  - Upper middle class: 6
  - Lower middle class: 6
  - Working class: 9
  - Lower class: 5
  - Total: 9

Showing Iranians are low trust culture.
A visible difference between large and small cities in the Mosque, TV, Armed Forces, Government and Parliament.
Institutional Confidence and Age
To what extent do you believe yourself to be religious?

- **Very much**: Inside Iran (6), Outside Iran (4)
- **Quite a lot**: Inside Iran (13), Outside Iran (5)
- **Not very religious**: Inside Iran (17), Outside Iran (8)
- **Not religious**: Inside Iran (11), Outside Iran (18)
- **I believe in god but do not practice**: Inside Iran (30), Outside Iran (23)
- **I believe in spirituality and all religions**: Inside Iran (13), Outside Iran (11)
- **I do not believe in god nor do I practice any religion**: Inside Iran (10), Outside Iran (32)
To what extent do you believe yourself to be religious?

Respondents: Inside Iran

- Very much
  - Men: 4%
  - Women: 7%

- Quite a lot
  - Men: 5%
  - Women: 12%

- Not very religious
  - Men: 8%
  - Women: 16%

- Not religious
  - Men: 12%
  - Women: 18%

- I believe in god but do not practice
  - Men: 12%
  - Women: 23%

- I believe in spirituality and all religions
  - Men: 11%
  - Women: 10%

- I do not believe in god nor do I practice any religion
  - Men: 14%
  - Women: 32%

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How many people around you do you know who are religious?

Respondents: Inside Iran

- Most people around me: 179
- Many people around me: 664
- Hardly any people around me: 728
- No one around me: 86
How many people around you do you know who are religious?

- **Inside Iran**
  - Most people around me: [Blue]
  - Many people around me: [Dark Blue]
  - Hardly any people around me: [Green]
  - No one around me: [Red]

- **Outside Iran**
  - Most people around me: [Blue]
  - Many people around me: [Dark Blue]
  - Hardly any people around me: [Green]
  - No one around me: [Red]
Actions and practices indicates religious people

- Going to Friday prayers
- Participating in neighborhood religious events
- Being honest and ethical
- Being humble
- Donating money and giving charity

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Would you say that most people can be trusted?

- Most people can be trusted: 12% Inside Iran, 23% Outside Iran
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- Only family members and known people can be trusted: 5% Inside Iran, 6% Outside Iran
- Do not know: 8% Inside Iran, 6% Outside Iran
Would you say that most people can be trusted?

- Most people can be trusted:
  - Men: 16
  - Women: 10

- Need to be very careful in dealing with people:
  - Men: 72
  - Women: 78

- Only family members and known people can be trusted:
  - Men: 6
  - Women: 5

- Do not know:
  - Men: 7
  - Women: 5
Would you say that most people can be trusted?

- **Most people can be trusted**
  - Upper class: 3%
  - Upper middle class: 13%
  - Lower middle class: 15%
  - Working class: 14%
  - Lower class: 16%

- **Need to be very careful in dealing with people**
  - Upper class: 65%
  - Upper middle class: 70%
  - Lower middle class: 75%
  - Working class: 76%

- **Only family members and known people can be trusted**
  - Upper class: 9%
  - Upper middle class: 9%
  - Lower middle class: 9%
  - Working class: 9%

- **Do not know**
  - Upper class: 9%
  - Upper middle class: 6%
  - Lower middle class: 6%

Showing Iranians are low trust culture.

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Summary of main points

• Iranians feel proud to be Iranian due to our culture, history, people.

• We should be recognised for our achievements in the arts, our role and impact on the region, our literary achievements, past achievements in science and maths, the achievements of the Iranian diaspora and our success in mathematics/science olympiads.

• Iran’s role should be to help all of humanity, Iran and then our immediate neighbours, It is of less importance to help other Islamic countries.

• Our goals in the next 5 years should be to improve the economic situation, get rid of sanctions, improve education and quality of life.

• Our least important goal in the next 5 years is developing nuclear technology and political developments.

• The role of family remains important in the Iranian culture, both for Iranians within Iran and outside Iran.
• Family comes first, then work and then friends.

• Most important values to teach our children are being responsible, working hard, independence, self-expression.

• Least important values to teach our children are religious faith, however women found this more important to encourage children to learn than men.

• The biggest gap between ideal and real values was in the honesty and loyalty of the Iranian people, meaning this is what is missing in the Iranian culture.

• The smallest gap was in family minded, maintaining family honour and being economical. The negative value (ie real value was greater than ideal) was in being cunning.

• Note: Cunning and opportunistic – in the Iranian culture it is good to be zerang, this was translated as opportunistic, however zerang (cunning) was also sometimes seen as a positive value. The findings show it is not seen in a positive light.
• Most respondents preferred their children to have their own companies, or be artists (other), hold a university degree, earn a high salary. They least wanted them to work in the public sector.

• A respected person is one who is honest, ethical, kind, trustworthy.

• More people did not believe in god and did not practice religion, or believed in god but did not practice religion, less people were religious.

• Women seemed to be less religious than men, however, women also noted that children should learn religious values.

• Institutional trust, people trust NGOs, the private sector and the mosque, there is least trust for the TV, government and parliament. There seemed to be a visible difference between large and small cities.

• Iranians are low trust, women seem more cautious to trust than men.

• Religious leaders were expected to be honest and ethical.
Conclusion and next steps

• We need to work more on recognising Iran’s efforts in arts, literature and sciences.

• Foster more collaboration and dialogue between Iran and the Iranian diaspora.

• NGOS and the private sector are trusted more in cities, how do we work more with these institutions? How to engage and raise trust with other institutions and in smaller cities?

• Religion is decreasing, what problems could this create in the long term? Learning from other Islamic countries, joint studies?

• Iran has the potential to be seen as an international and respected player, how do we enable Iran to get to this position? What projects can we initiate?

• Within Iran, values such as honesty, taking responsibility and independence need to be better developed. How should we educate the youth better, how can we model these values in society?

• Other ideas?
Thank you

If you would like to support the Simorgh Foundation, please contact us at info@thesimorgh.com

The complete presentation is available on our website.