Survey Report on Difficulties Faced by Iranian Students in the US Due to Single-Entry F1 Visa

Conducted by MEVISA
Multiple Entry Visa for Iranian Students
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Executive Summary

Iranian students in the U.S. are granted single-entry visas in a process that takes usually a few months. Most, if not all of us, ultimately suffer from problems related to our single-entry visa. Single-entry student visa implies that every time one of us leaves the country he/she needs to apply for and receive a new visa. Visa issuance is usually halted until the end of clearance process usually taking well over one month. Therefore, it is practically impossible for Iranian students to leave the US during their studies. The delay in clearance process makes it impossible for a full-time graduate student to visit family members (even take part in family emergencies) or attend conferences outside the U.S. during the course of studies, which for graduate students may range from four to eight years, all negatively impacting performance.

For the first time, MEVISA conducted a survey on this issue, in order to collect real data from the F1 visa holder Iranian students. The survey mostly focuses on waiting time due to clearance processing time after a student submits his/her application to a US consulate. It also covers the personal and academic consequences of single entry policy Iranian students.

The results show that about 80% of Iranian students do not leave the U.S. during their studies mostly due to uncertainty in obtaining the re-entry visa (78.2%) and long clearance process (63.3%). Among those students who left the U.S. 37% had to wait for their visa clearance more than 3 months meaning they missed part of or a complete semester. Also, comparison between the visa waiting time for new and returning students shows 20% increase in waiting time for returning students. The average visa waiting time obtained from this survey was compared to the similar data available from department of state and a similar survey conducted by Saudi Arabian students. The average visa waiting time for returning Iranian students is about 71 days while it’s 15 days according to the department of state data. This data clearly indicates that Iranian students wait considerably longer to obtain their visas compared to the average visa waiting time.

62.3% of the survey responders stated that they had an emergency occasion or family event that required them to leave the U.S. but they decided not to leave due to single-entry visa policy. Also, 82.7% of students stated that the single-entry visa policy affected their studies and research in a negative way. These students stated that single-entry visa policy prevents them to attend international conferences, scientific workshops and internships opportunities available outside the U.S. Also, the long separation between the students and their families has adversely affected their academic performance.

1. Introduction

Iranian students are one of the considerable bodies in graduate studies at higher education institutions in the United States. Most of them are studying in science and technology fields and have impacted their scientific communities positively through numerous publications and effective research, most of which benefit national interest of the United States.

The official number of Iranian students in the U.S. is unknown to us, however, based on the number of issued students visas (F1) to Iranian students through 2005-2009 reported by the
Department of States [1], it is estimated that between 4000-5000 Iranian students are currently studying in the U.S. on F1 visa.

Most international students hold multiple-entry visas valid for the duration of the course of their studies, allowing them to return home or to attend international conferences or scientific workshops in their fields. However, mostly due to the political tensions between U.S. and Iran, Iranian students hold single-entry visa with 3 months validity period. Table 1 shows the number of allowed entries and validity period of F1 visas for few different countries with restricted visas [2]. Comparison between the visa restrictions between the listed countries indicates that Iranian students hold one of the most restrictive student visas in terms of number of entries and validity period.

Table 1: Number of entries and validity period of F1 visas for different countries [2]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of allowed entries</th>
<th>Validity period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>24 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Korea</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>60 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3 months</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Single entry visa policy has adversely affected the personal and academic lives of Iranian students for many years. If they leave the U.S. for any reason, they should reapply for a new visa without any guaranty to receive one. After scheduling an appointment with a US consulate in a third country, they go through an interview process and upon approval to receive a new student visa by the interviewing officer, they wait for an unpredictable amount of time until their “clearance” is received. This additional administrative process takes anywhere between a few weeks up to six months or more. This unpredictability makes it virtually impossible for the Iranian students to leave the country while they are on F1 status.

In hope to urge changing student visa regulation on Iranian students, and discussing the possibility of multiple-entry visa for Iranian students, a group of Iranian students launched http://MEVISA.org. The group hopes to use this platform to better communicate with the groups of interest towards resolve this long-lasting issue. Currently, MEVISA has more than thirty student representatives in different universities across the US.

To collect real data regarding the problems that Iranian student are facing due to single-entry visa policy, MEVISA conducted an online survey on October 20th 2010 for a period of 1 week. The survey focuses mostly on statistics of visa issuing waiting time as well as personal and professional problems due to single-entry visa policy.
2. Method
The survey included ten multiple choice questions and was distributed among F1 visa holders through different channels that MEVISA has established, including Iranian student university mailing lists and social networking sites. Results were collected for a total of 1143 respondents, which we estimate represents about 30% of total Iranian student population.

3. Results
The following summarizes the results:

1- What is your gender?
   - Male: 66.3%
   - Female: 33.7%

2- What is your highest degree program of your study?
   - Undergraduate: 2.6%
   - Graduate-Master’s: 19.4%
   - Graduate-PhD: 74.7%
   - Postgraduate: 3%
   - Other: 0.3%

3- How long did the clearance process take until your entry visa got issued when you came to the U.S for the first time?
   - Less than a month: 29.3%
   - Between 1-2 months: 40.8%
   - Between 3-4 months: 22.1%
   - Between 4-6 months: 4.6%
   - More than 6 months: 3.2%

4- What was the purpose of your trip if you have ever left U.S. during your study?
   - Academic (conference, workshop, etc): 13.8%
   - Visiting family: 58%
   - Family emergency: 15%
   - Other: 13.1%
   
   Note: The original question had a “Does not apply” choice representing the students who never left the U.S. In order to calculate the responses based on the number of students...
who left the U.S., the percentages were re-calculated to obtain the correct numbers. This method was also used for questions 5 and 6.

5- After your trip outside US, how long did you wait for the clearance process until the visa got re-issued? If you are currently waiting, how long is it yet?
- Less than a month: 30%
- **Between 1-2 months: 33%**
- Between 3-4 months: 21.6%
- Between 4-6 months: 8%
- More than 6 months: 7%

6- Where did you apply for your re-entry visa?
- Canada: 8.3%
- Cyprus: 17.8%
- Turkey: 23.2%
- **UAE: 32.5%**
- Other: 17.4%

7- If you have never left the US during your studies, what prevents you from traveling outside the US?
- **Risk of not obtaining the re-entry visa: 78.2%**
- Long visa issuance process: 63.3%
- Cost of re-applying for visa: 19.1%
- Does not apply: 10.7%
- Other: 2.6%

8- Has there been a specific emergency occasion or a family event that required you to visit family but you could not due to single entry policy?
- **Yes: 62.3%**
- No: 37.7%

9- Has single entry visa policy affected your studies or your research in a negative way? If yes, please Explain.
- **Yes (please specify): 82.7%**
- No: 17.3%
10- Please provide us with your own story describing if you have faced any stress or emotional difficulties for not visiting your family or not attending an abroad event which required you to leave USA, due to current policy for F1- Single Entry Visa for Iranian Students.

- Answered: 303 (refer to appendix for the selected stories)

4. Discussion

4.1 Visa waiting time

The results show that about 80% of Iranian students do not leave the U.S. during their studies mostly due to uncertainty in obtaining the re-entry visa (78.2%) and long clearance process (63.3%). Among those students who left the U.S. 37% had to wait for their visa clearance more than 3 months meaning they missed part of or a complete semester. Also, comparison between the visa waiting time for new and returning students shows 20% increase in waiting time for returning students. The average visa waiting time obtained from this survey was compared to the similar data available from department of state and a similar survey conducted by Saudi Arabian students. The average visa waiting time for returning Iranian students is about 71 days while it’s 15 days according to the department of state data. This data clearly indicates that Iranian students wait considerably longer to obtain their visas compared to the average visa waiting time.

62.3% of the survey responders stated that they had an emergency occasion or family event that required them to leave the U.S. but they decided not to leave due to single-entry visa policy. Also, 82.7% of students stated that the single-entry visa policy affected their studies and research in a negative way. These students stated that single-entry visa policy prevents them to attend international conferences, scientific workshops and internships opportunities available outside the U.S. Also, the long separation between the students and their families has adversely affected their academic performance.

Comparison between the average visa waiting time for students who came to the U.S. for the first time and the returning students shows an increase from 63 days to 71 days which translates into 20% increase in waiting time for returning students. Also, 7% of returning students waited for their visa clearance more than 6 months which shows a considerable increase compared to 3.2% of students who came to the U.S. for the first time with the same time interval of visa waiting time. The details of visa waiting time are given in results of questions 4 and 5 for new and returning students respectively.

We have also compared these results with the data provided by the Department of State and the results found by Saudi Arabian students. The updated data from the department of state on this specific topic is not published. However, according to a report by the United States Government Accountability office [3], as of November 30, 2004, 87% of visas (Mantis visa) cases were cleared in a month or less, 5% were taking 1-2 months, 5% were taking 2-3 months, 1% were taking 3–4 months and the final 2% were taking more than 4 months. Also, the average
time was 15 days, which was significantly reduced from the figure of 75 days during October 2003. On February 11, 2005, the Department of State announced that it "has been able to decrease the average time to obtain Visas Mantis clearance to less than 14 days" [4].

Similar survey about visa waiting time and other related issues were conducted by group of Saudi Arabian students in the U.S. from November 2008 to February 2009 [5]. Their results show that 65% of visa cases cleared less than two weeks, 21% took 2-8 weeks, 6% took 8-12 weeks and the final 8% took more than three months. Comparison between clearance time of visa cases between Iranian students on the one hand and the department of state data and Saudi Arabian students survey results on the other hand, reveals that visa cases related to Iranian students take considerably longer systematically in almost all cases.

4.1.1 Correlation of wait time with gender

Upon filtering the results based on gender, we found that the average waiting time for male and female students who came to the U.S. for the first time were 61 and 60 days respectively showing negligible effect of gender on waiting time for new students. However, the average waiting time for returning male and female students were 71 and 61 days, indicating 26% increase in waiting time for males versus females. Also, we found that 8.8% of returning male students experienced a waiting time more than 6 months while 2.8% of returning female students experienced the same waiting time indicating that male students are more likely to experience long visa delay when leaving the U.S.

4.1.2 Correlation of wait time with the issuing embassy

The average waiting time for U.S. consulates located in UAE, Canada, Turkey and Cyprus were 64, 65, 90 and 56 days respectively. Also, 13.5% of returning students who were interviewed in Turkey experienced more than 6 months visa delay making U.S. consulate in Turkey ranked first in terms of the longest average waiting time.

4.2 Effect of single-entry visa on personal and academic life

62.3% of the survey responders stated that they had an emergency occasion or family event that required them to leave the U.S. but they did not leave due to single-entry visa policy. Also, 82.7% of students stated that the single-entry visa policy affected their studies and research in a negative way. In question 8 and 9 we asked students to specifically describe the adverse effects of single entry visa policy, and among 1110 answers collected to this question we found the following main categories:

- Being unable to attend major international conferences and scientific workshops, including the ones in Europe or even Canada
- Adverse effects in studies due to emotional stress and prolonged separation with family, i.e. becoming home sick
- Loosing a semester and having funding suspended/endangered
In the last question we asked them to describe the specific situations that they encountered. 303 stories were collected, a selection of which is presented in the appendix.

5. Appendix: selected personal stories

1. I could not leave the US to Canada to attend a very important conference in my research field in which I had a paper. I was worried that it would take a long time to get my visa back. Also I had the chance to visit my family in Canada at that time, but I did not go because of visa problems. Although I had left the US once one year before this conference to visit my family in Iran and I got my re-entry visa in 3 weeks, I was under a lot of pressure and stress and I did not want to go through the same situation again, as it could have had a negative effect on my research here.

2. Recently, an extreme case happened to a close friend of mine. She was in the third year of her PhD studies and her dad just passed away and she did not take the risk to go to Iran to sympathize with the family. She was in terrible, emotional condition!!

3. Well, I have a long story...but I'll tell the short version of it. My girlfriend and I were planning to marry, but when I came to US I realized that it is not easy to leave. I had to choose one, Family or PhD, difficult situation. We decided to wait some more time but her family didn't want us to wait. So, the only choice BREAK UP after 4 years of being in a relationship :(

4. I have had several papers accepted in major conferences which I could not go and present due to the U.S. visa issue. This includes IMC2010 in Australia, PAM2010 in Switzerland, INFOCOM2009 in Brazil, and the Global Internet Symp. 2006 in Spain. One can imagine the impact of missed opportunities like these in a researcher's career and life ---- PhD student, University of Oregon

5. After feeling a decrease in my academic performance I went to my university's counseling center and was diagnosed with depression and recommended to go back and see my family but I did not do so because of the problems I specified in question 7 of this survey.

6. My father was diagnosed with cancer last summer. My parents are both over 65 my only sister left had to leave Iran a month after my father was diagnosed with cancer. I am deeply sad that in this situation when my old parents need me, I cannot be there for them. Even I cannot come back and visit them to give them at least a bit of hope and happiness. All this is happening and I am going through all this because a terrorist form
Middle East has done something terrible in US. It is not fair that we, especially as Iranian students who do nothing except contributing to science and technology in US, are suffering instead of some terrorists. It is really easy to put yourself in our shoes, how does it feel not to see your sick father for two years when he desperately wants to see you once again.

7. When I came to the states my father was diagnosed with cancer. In a year he had a recurrence. I went back over the summer. The return F1 visa took 3.5 months to be issued and this made me miss the first half of the fall semester. The next summer, my father's had metastasized and he was in terminal condition. I went back to Iran during the worst of my life. This time the visa took 6.5 month to be reissued and I missed a semester again. This made me not to go back to Iran for 5 years before I finished my Ph.D. and the O.P.T period, even though my widowed mother was very lonely and emotionally needed my support very much. As an Iranian, I feel like my quality of life has always been significantly jeopardized mainly by the policies of my own government. But the lack of understanding on the part of the US state department and its treatment of Iranian citizens' visa matters, Iranians who are no supporters of the policies of their own government and far from being terrorists have contributed to the well-being of the interests of the American society, has also contributed to degrading my quality of life compared to what it could have been otherwise.

8. I have a kid and my family really misses him. There are lots of times that I want to be there just for one or two weeks but due to our single entry visa we simply can't! After 10 days that we entered US for the first time my father had an accident and he went to deep coma. I always wanted to see him for the last time but I couldn't due to our clearance problems, I already deferred one semester and my advisor and the university couldn't accept latency. Specially, after I did the registration and everything. I could decide to go back to Iran and be in my father's funeral, but that meant that I couldn't come back at least for 1 or 2 months! so I decided to stay... I can't still believe that my father's gone and I always blame myself not to see him for the last time :( 

9. I am already under a lot of stress. I came here to do my Masters and recently I started my PhD as well which is going to be for 5 years which means I would not be able to see my family for another 5 years. I feel upset because of the political problems with my country government; we (people of Iran) are ending up getting punished whether we live in Iran or outside Iran. I hope that this survey could really work and someone hears our voice and help us. Whoever came here to USA for higher education, they are all really hard working. Most of them decide to do their PhD as well like my case which means they should end up not seeing their family for years just because they like to study further.
10. I had a hard time the first one year, being away from my family. I remember I cried almost every night. For the Persian New Year, I celebrated it by myself, it felt lonely and sad. I still risked and went to Iran for summer to see my family, but going back to the embassy appointment, filling out forms, etc, made me realize it's not worth it to do that next summer. I do see this as an inhumane rule. We are being punished for something that we haven't chosen to be part of and do not want to be part of. I don't understand why our lives as students, artists, and researchers should be so mixed with politics and what makes it OK for Korean and Chinese students to travel home with multi-entry visa and what makes it dangerous for Iranian students whom I don't think have ever been involved in any terrorist action.

11. I won a fellowship to attend a conference in Canada, but I could not attend. I had opportunities to study in Japan or other countries during the summer but I couldn't go. I wanted to visit my mother that had breast cancer and my father that had a heart surgery but I couldn't. I wanted to attend the wedding ceremony of my cousins but I couldn't.

12. I left US to visit Iran after 3 years of studying in US. Upon our arrival to US Consulate in Dubai, the officer rejected our F1 (F2) visas because he asked me "What do you want to do after your graduation?" twice, and I replied, in an honest way, wherever I find a job for both times. The officer then said he was looking to hear "I want to go back to Iran"! It was just a miracle that I got my re-entry visa in Cyprus after 3 times of rejection in Dubai and after 3 months. My wife got her visa after 4 times, and she joined me, 2 months after I arrived in US. We have two US-born sons, and the officer was insisting that because of them I will not leave US!

6. References