Survey Report on the Multiple-Entry Visa Policy Implementation for Iranian Students and Scholars

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1 Executive Summary

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.

The visa policy has been modified by the current administration so that eligible applicants can receive a two-year multiple-entry visa. The announcement of new visa policy for Iranian students and scholars created a lot of hopes for facilitating travel outside of the U.S. However, only a small percentage of applicants have received multiple-entry visas since its initiation in May 2011.

In order to obtain real figures and study the issues and challenges related to the implementation of this policy, the Iranian Students and Graduates Association (ISGA)\(^1\) in the U.S. conducted an online survey in April 2012. According to the survey results, more than three-fourths of the applicants who filled out the survey have received single-entry visas. None of students who received single-entry visas was found to study fields related to nuclear science or proliferation activities. The survey results also show that the visa number of entrance is highly dependent on the visa issuing post. While more than 80% of visa applicants who had interview in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan received multiple-entry visas, only 10% of visa applicants who went to UAE received multiple-entry visas. The average waiting time for visa clearance was 49 days which again was found to be dependent on visa issuing post. Students who went to the U.S. consulate general in Dubai for interview waited on average about 70 days.

The survey results indicate that although new change in the U.S. visa policy has alleviated the strict visa regulations for Iranian students, still a large number of students did not benefit from the policy change due to its ambiguity. In the following sections, the method of survey, the analysis and insights of survey results, and the new visa policy implementation challenges will be discussed. Some of the personal experiences of survey participants are also provided in the final section.

\(^1\) [http://isga-us.org/](http://isga-us.org/)
2 Introduction

Almost a year ago, the press release and the announcement made by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton about new change in the U.S. visa policy for Iranian students, caused a great excitement among the Iranian students and scholars and the Iranian-American community. The visa policy modification is a great achievement in response to efforts made by many including the student organizations such as Multiple Entry Visa for Iranian Students Assembly (MEVISA) and the Iranian-American communities such as National Iranian American Council (NIAC) and the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA), just to name a few.

As of May 20, 2011, under the new visa policy regulation, ‘qualified’ Iranians who apply for F, M or J visa, are eligible to receive two-year, multiple entry visas. This policy opened new avenues of engagement for the Iranian students and scholars who can now travel to their home country to visit family without suffering prolonged delays of obtaining a new single entry visa. Furthermore, they do not have to suffer for not being able to travel especially during family emergency or participation in international conferences and internships during their long course of studies in the US.

While the new policy has alleviated the challenges that Iranian students have been experiencing, but still a large number of students did not benefit from the policy change. Some statistics show that many students have been prevented a multiple entry visa. The new policy reads that it applies for only non-sensitive, non-technical fields of study and research. These terms brings a lot of ambiguity and make the implementation of the visa policy to rely heavily on the knowledge and authority of the U.S. embassy officers in charge of the visa issuance. The Persian page of Department of State facebook elaborates “non-sensitive,” “non-technical” fields as those that do not contribute to the Iranian government’s proliferation activities. However, only the officers have to recognize appropriately whether the applicant’s field of study is non-sensitive, non-technical, and issue a single or multiple entry visa. The question remains that whether the new policy is being implemented as required, or whether the policy or the implementation process needs further modification.

The Iranian Students and Graduates Association (ISGA) in the U.S. decided to collect realistic information regarding the issues and problems encountered in implementing the multiple-entry visa policy for Iranian students and scholars, and present them to the Department of State. The aim is to facilitate a resolution to the current issues by communicating the correct information to the Department of State officials. For this purpose, ISGA conducted a survey to

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2 http://www.mevisa.org/
3 http://www.niacouncil.org/
4 http://www.paaia.org/
5 http://hojabri.net/letter-to-secretary-clinton-new/
6 http://www.facebook.com/USAdarFarsi?sk=app_208195102528120
collect data from Iranian students and scholars who have obtained an F, M or J visa after May 20, 2011.

3 Method

The survey has been designed for the purpose of collecting data regarding the issues about the new visa policy. It was carried out anonymously targeted for Iranian students and scholars who obtained F, M or J visa after May 20, 2011. The survey collects data related to the applicants’ field of study, the U.S. embassy which they applied for, whether they received a single or multiple entry visa, and possible time delays they have encountered due to the administrative process (clearance). The survey link submitted to Iranians student societies’ listservs who are affiliates of ISGA, and also shared on social networks such as Facebook.

The participants filled out the survey online through any computer with access to the internet. Also, Participants could share personal experiences, such as visa rejection or long clearance, through the comments section provided at the end of survey.

4 Results

The following summarizes the results:

1- What is your gender?
   - Male: 68.97%
   - Female: 31.03%

2- Are you a new or returning student/scholar?
   - New Student or Scholar: 78.29%
   - Returning Student or Scholar: 21.71%

3- What is the degree you are studying?
   - B.Sc.: 1.72%
   - M.Sc.: 21.84%
   - Ph.D.: 72.41%
   - Post Graduate: 4.02%
4- Please specify the type of visa you hold?
   • F (Academic Student): 96.57%
   • M (Vocational Student): 0.00%
   • J (Exchange Visitor): 3.43%

5- Which embassy did you apply?
   • United Arab Emirates: 40.57%
   • Turkey: 22.29%
   • Cyprus: 8.00%
   • Others: 29.14%

6- How long did the clearance process take?
   • One Month or Less: 44.83%
   • Between 1-2 Months: 32.76%
   • Between 3-4 Months: 17.24%
   • Between 5-6 Months: 3.45%
   • More than 6 Months: 1.72%

7- What type of visa did you receive?
   • Single-entry: 76.57%
   • Multiple-entry: 23.43%

8- What is the field of your study? (please Specify your major)
   • Engineering and Science: 82.86%
   • Medical and Biological Sciences: 4.57%
   • Art and Human Sciences: 12.57%

9- Please provide us with any suggestion that can help ease the visa clearance of Iranian students and scholars. Also, if you have a special experience (like visa rejection or long clearance), please share it with us.
5 Discussion

In the following sections, the correlation between visa number of entries and different factors are addressed.

5.1 Visa Number of Entries

Among Iranian students and scholars who participated in the current survey only 23.4% of them could receive multiple-entry visas. Among those who received multiple entry visa, 83% were students who were coming to the U.S. for the first time. This group of students and scholars constitute more than 78% of the whole visa applicants filling out the survey.

5.2 Correlation between Visa Number of Entries and Gender

21% of male students received multiple-entry visas while 29% of female applicants received multiple-entry visas issued in different posts. This shows that female applicants have slightly better chance to receive multiple-entry visas.

5.3 Correlation between Visa Number of Entries and Field of Study

The most important factor on obtaining the visa type seems to be the major or research area. In order to address the importance of this factor we filtered the survey results based on the responders’ field of study. The students and scholars in the field of Engineering and Science constitute about 83% of the responders. Two other major fields of Medical and Biological Sciences, and Art and Human Sciences constitute 4.6%, and 12.4% of the responders, respectively. Based on the conducted survey, only 17% of the applicants in Engineering and Science field received multiple-entry visa. On the other hand, 73% of the students in the field of Art and Human Sciences received multiple-entry visa. This means that the major part of Iranian students who study in the technical fields received a small portion of the multiple-entry visas issued. Engineering students where asked about the major they are studying and none of them was found to be related to nuclear science which according to the Persian page of Department of State facebook should be a key factor for issuing multiple-entry visas.

5.4 Correlation between Visa Number of Entries and Visa Issuing Post

The survey results are filtered to investigate the correlation between the visa issuing post and the corresponding number of multiple entry visas issued. Figure 1 illustrates the percentage
of multiple-entry visas issued by different visa posts for the Iranian students and scholars. As shown in the histogram in Figure 1, almost 100% of applicants who went to the U.S. embassy in Uzbekistan received multiple-entry visas regardless of their field of studies or gender or any other factors. Also, 70% of those who applied in Turkmenistan received multiple entry visas. On the other hand, only a small number of the visas issued for the Iranian students in the U.S. embassies in Turkey and UAE, are multiple-entry. It is evident that there is a high dependency of number of multiple entry visas issued on the visa issuing post. This is more emphasized by considering the fact that about 63% of the Iranian students and scholars who participated in the survey had applied for a visa in U.S. embassies in Turkey and UAE. Specifically, the U.S. consulate in Dubai which interviewed about 40% of survey participant (the highest percentages of applicants) has issued multiple-entry visas to only 10% of the applicants.

![Figure 1: Dependency of Multiple-Entry Visas Issuance on the U.S. Visa Posts.](image)

### 5.5 Visa Waiting Time

The survey results show that the average waiting time for Iranian students and scholars is 49 days with a very high variation. Figure 2 shows the average waiting time that Iranian students who participated in the survey experienced in different U.S. visa issuing posts. According to this Figure the applicants at the U.S. consulate in UAE experienced on average 72 days of waiting for
the clearance, the longest waiting time among U.S. visa issuing posts. The U.S. visa posts in Azerbaijan and Turkey are ranked next with 45 and 39 days of waiting time, respectively.

According to the conducted survey, the average waiting time for both returning and new students was approximately 49 days. About 5.1% of the responders experienced a waiting time more than 5 months. All of these responders went to U.S. consulate in Dubai (UAE). In addition, it was found that 2.6% of returning students waited for their visa clearance more than 5 months. Also, 5.8% of the students who come to the U.S. for the first time experienced the same visa waiting time.

6 Conclusion

ISGA conducted an online survey in April 2012. According to the survey results, 77% of the applicants who filled out the survey have received single-entry visas. Also 27% of the students in the field of Art and Human Sciences received single-entry visa. These results clearly show that the relevance of field of studies to proliferation activities is not the only factor for issuing single-entry visa.

The survey results were filtered based on the place of interview and surprisingly it was found that the visa number of entrance is highly dependent on the visa issuing post. While near 100% and 70% of visa applicants who had interview in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan respectively received multiple-entry visas only 10% and 20% of visa applicants who went to
UAE and Turkey respectively received multiple-entry visas. The average waiting time for visa clearance was 49 days which again was found to be dependent on visa issuing post. Students who went to the U.S. consulate general in Dubai for interview waited on average about 70 days while students who went to the U.S. embassy in Tashkent waited on average about 15 days.

7 Appendix: Selected Personal Experiences

1. I suggest that for returning students do the clearance before they exit United States or before their interview since it is already done at least once. It should take shorter time but in my case in took more than the first two times.

2. I hope that there would be some ways to accelerate the visa process; mine took about three months and I passed all the days in total anxiety. Also I wish that you change our visa into Multiple-entry visa.

3. I had applied for a visa at U.S. embassy in Dubai, on the 14th of June, they agreed to issue a visa for me, but said that I should go through the administrative processing; however, after six month I didn't get cleared. So despite spending a lot of money for travelling to Dubai and being interviewed, I had to close my case in Dubai and travel to Uzbekistan for a second interview. Even when I wanted to close my case in Dubai, they told me that if I close my case in Dubai and apply from a second embassy, the process will take the same amount of time, However, I did what I wanted, and applied from Uzbekistan, this time I was cleared in 25 days! I really think that it was the chaos in US embassy in Dubai that caused my case to take so much time, why it took just 25 days for Uzbekistan to do the administrative processing? 2-For picking up my visa, I had to travel to Uzbekistan a second time, and because there is only one flight from my country to there, I had to travel to Uzbekistan twice, which was very expensive for me, I wish the process of clearance would be shorter, so that I would receive my visa in the same day. or at list the US embassy in Uzbekistan agree that somebody else picks up the visa for us, like many other embassies.

4. Multiple-entry visa is very crucial for us. It is really hard not to see our family and home country for all the duration of our degree (more than 4 years!)... If we can have vacation to our country, it can be more helpful (like other students from other countries)...

5. My interview was on May 5th 2011 after 173 days I went to Embassy of United States in Ashgabat without cancelling my request in Dubai. The officer in Ashgabat told me he couldn't do anything for me because I hadn't cancelled my request in
Dubai and the only thing that he could do was to send a positive note to Dubai. I came back to Iran and after 9 days got cleared in Dubai!

6. I want to share you the experience of my close friend. He applied for the F1 Visa twice. In both cases his visa was rejected after more than two months of clearance processes. He was not provided with any clear reason at all. Just received a refusal letter said that he is not eligible to enter the States. I have to add that he did not have any kind of dangerous background. This event made him sick and very unhappy.

7. I hope you read what I am writing and think about it. This type of visa is so unfair for anyone and is more unfair to be applied to just Iranian. We are here to pursue education to change some part of human problems and improve life for human being. On the other hand, we all passed FBI check and get cleared so single entry visa does not make any sense in either case. Also it is not easy for our family to get US visa as we don't have US embassy in IRAN. So it is like we are forced to choose between our interest (education) and all our beloved ones, which obviously is unfair. I really would like to consider this problem and try to change the rule for all Iranian students here and those who are coming. Thank you, a student.

8. Getting an appointment was very difficult when I wanted to get my VISA (in 2008-2009). 2- Clearance process takes long time and is stressful. I could not sleep to get cleared. I think they should eliminate this process or make it 2 to 3 days. This does not make sense that a student who wants to go for graduate school goes through the whole process. 3- Practically multiple entry VISA was a kind of slogan, practically 95% of the students who went back to Iran and came back again got single entry visa which is weird. I hope some people can understand that we are students here and we do not have time to involve ourselves to political issues, please trust us and let us be treated as normal people not sick ones that cannot go back to visit their home town and if they did there is no guarantee that they can come back and they should go through clearance process. This is insane.

9. I applied for F-1 visa as a returning student on June 7th, 2011 in Dubai, UAE and I was approved. Unfortunately my administrative process took about 4.5 months till October 19th, 2011, when I was informed through an e-mail. When I received my visa I noticed that as the date clearance received it is indicated August 29th, 2011. During this process, I lost a semester of my study for nothing (If I was informed even early September I could have registered for fall semester, while I had to take that semester leave of absence). I never understood why it took about 40 days to inform me about my clearance!!!
I finished 5 semesters of PhD of mechanical Engineering in the US. I had a trip to IRAN to visit my family after 27 months on December 2012. I took an interview for F1 visa at U.S. Consulate in Dubai. Unfortunately after 12 weeks of waiting for the administrative process, I received a letter of refusal saying my application has been denied under section INA 212(a)(3)(A)(I). I have been experiencing very sad days in the last months. I do believe that this rejection is unfair and against justice. I have been just studying in my whole life. I do not have any work experience, military service. I do not know what to do now, but I hope your organization could help me.