

# Worried About Iran? Great Neck Has Just Been Taken Over by Iranians...

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By David Zielenziger

Remember the old “Saturday Night Live” routine in which Gilda Radner mimicked a spoiled Jewish American princess that began “I’m Rhonda Weiss. From Great Neck!?”

Today, that routine might begin, “I’m Fariba Sharifian. From Great Neck!”

On July 7, the Long Island village of nearly 11,000 installed Pedram Bral MD, 45, as its mayor. Born in Iran, he's the first Iranian-born mayor in New York State. (There's been an Iranian trustee since 2013, as well as one on the board of neighboring Kings Point since 2002 (a second was appointed in 2012) and an Iran-born member of the North Hempstead Town Council since 2012.)

But this is a first and represents a shift in the orientation of a community once known as one of the area's most liberal and cosmopolitan. Bral, a gynecologist with a practice at Maimonides Hospital in Brooklyn, is an Orthodox Jew and wears a *kippah*. He is a Republican and was elected with overwhelming support from the Iranian and Orthodox voters.

Now what? For sure, the shift represents a reflection of the ethnic power of both Iranians and Orthodox Jews, who've changed the composition of the community over the past 30 years. Iranians began moving into Great Neck, one of nine villages within a school district with a population around 41,000, after the Iranian revolution. More than 15,000, according to the latest Jewish Community Survey, live within the Villages of Great Neck, the smaller Kings Point, Saddle Rock and Great Neck Estates.

The shift hasn't been without tensions. The various villages adopted new zoning ordinances after many new Iranian arrivals started building huge houses on small plots. More than a dozen synagogues caused more disputes, especially over parking and the

removal of properties from tax rolls. Iranian developers built several multi-family projects within the Village of Great Neck, one of which carved out a hillside that had one house and replaced it with three “McMansions.”

The most notorious dispute occurred when a group from the Iranian City of Mashhad, more insular than the more outgoing Tehranis, chopped down 44 trees for a synagogue parking lot without permits. Ultimately, they were fined \$44,000 and ordered to replant the trees after they won approval from the zoning board for the parking lot. Today, the stumps remain and the parking lot, not built.

In 2009, an Iranian group with alleged funding from Latin America, sought to erect a giant *mikveh*, or ritual bath. The mikveh is for ritual immersion – a process that converts to Judaism must undergo according to Orthodox and Conservative rabbis. In addition, a woman must immerse in a mikveh after each menstrual period and child birth before she can resume sexual relations with her husband. The proposed giant was to be a two-story structure with nine ritual pools, an equal number of bathrooms and a second-story apartment for a supervising rabbi. That proposal lapsed apparently because the funds were invested with Bernard Madoff. (The area now has three *mikvehs* within synagogues, all off-limits to non-Orthodox Jews.)

Great Neck's Iranians have also opened shops and restaurants as well as made supermarkets and banks reflect their presence. There's a handful of Iranian restaurants, all kosher, with names like Shiraz and Colbeh, as well as a deli that specializes more in kebabs than salamis. Butchers, barber shops and beauty parlors serve the community, mainly in the Village of Great Neck, along with a few women's clothing stores, gift shops, a candy store and a bakery that advertises itself "French Kosher" but has Farsi banners in its window and serves a mainly Iranian clientele.

Saturday car traffic is a fraction of what it was 20 years ago. Pedestrians fill the streets, not just the sidewalks, often with men walking in the middle wearing *tallitot*, or large prayer shawls. Women with head scarves and long dresses follow, usually pushing multi-seat baby carriages. Most shops in the village are now closed on Saturday, as is the Chase Bank, which remains open on Sundays.

The park commission has twice been asked to institute separate-gender swimming hours; last year, it rejected a request by a Lubavitcher summer camp to bus as many as 200 daily to the pool.

Iranians own a used-car business and have some presence in auto body shops largely south of the village. And scores of Iranian doctors, dentists and lawyers have their names in the lobbies of professional buildings mainly in Great Neck Plaza and along the crowded Northern Blvd. to the south.

One of the huge kosher supermarkets, ShopDelight, expanded recently and added an open-hearth bakery that sells Iranian breads like sangak and barbari. Its rival, Everfresh, won a building permit from the Village of Great Neck last year for a major expansion that was to have added a similar bakery but hasn't moved forward. Those markets, as well as the local Waldbaum's and Associated, have added larger kosher aisles and now sell huge sacks of basmati rice and other provisions.

And as with any group that's been around for a while, Iranians pop up all over. They include the head pharmacist in one of the chain drugstores, tellers and lending officers in some of the banks, teachers and letter carriers. For years, Iranians have been volunteer firefighters in both Great Neck fire departments.

One notorious Iranian retail failure was the Fountain Blue Hookah Parlor, a local outlet of a chain based in Los Angeles. Opened over enormous community opposition from apartment owners in nearby buildings, the business was open for only a few months last year but never attracted a clientele. The Village of Great Neck, which had already banned smoking on sidewalks in the business district, has since passed a "no hookah parlor" law.

The giant liberal synagogues in the village have been hurt. Temple Israel, Conservative, and Temple Beth-el, Reform, have both lost a third of their members; the Reform Temple Emanuel, in Kings Point, has lost more. However, the shift from Ashkenazi to Sephardi Jews appears to have stabilized, especially with an influx of Chinese and Koreans, whose children fill the seats in public schools vacated by the Orthodox (the first Chinese school board candidate, a Princeton PhD., won 37% of the vote last year).

So what will New York's first Iranian mayor do? Nobody really knows. This writer, who's attended nearly every village board and zoning board meeting in this century, has only seen him once at Village Hall. He was silent. There was no debate in the campaign.

Rumors are rife that he will seek a total ban on driving from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday and that all retail establishments will have to close as well to observe the Sabbath as understood by Orthodox Jews. At his inaugural July 7, Bral didn't announce much beyond suspending plans to sell Village properties and erect a \$10 million new Village Hall. He also fired the Village Attorney, whose firm had represented the village for decades.

Bral won his election on resentments about code enforcement, such as requiring payment for new permits for incomplete work on home improvements, as well as tickets for parking near the new synagogues on Saturdays and Jewish festivals.

What does this mean for Mayor Bral?

The garbage will still have to be picked up, the snow plowed and the village will have to comply with storm water runoff laws, etc. Pending is a highly controversial move by an Iranian developer whose in-laws are the billionaire Moinian real estate family, to raze the Academy Gardens rental apartments for condos. Academy Gardens' remaining 39 families are all either African American or Hispanic; the Planning Board has engaged a Queens College professor to determine if demolition would pose “disparate impact” on the community. Four Iranian synagogues on Steamboat Rd. alone have largely eliminated Great Neck's African-American community.

For sure, if Bral tries to institute religious requirements he'll run afoul of the law and face opposition, at least from his Catholic trustee and liberal members of the community. And he won't be able to abolish the building codes as they are mandated by state law.

Meanwhile, huge development is at hand. The former Mayor had put various Village-owned properties up for sale and claimed to have interest from various Iranian developers who've already built apartments and townhouses. It broke a three-story height limit to allow AvalonBay Communities, one of the largest REITs, to build a 191-unit luxury rental building on a former coal and oil depot on Manhasset Bay.

Will Bral start the shift that leads to Great Neck becoming an Iranian version of upstate Orthodox villages like Kiryas Joel or New Square? Will the Iranian-Orthodox alliance sustain itself and beat the remaining incumbents next year? Is Iran taking over New York? Stay tuned.

David Zielenziger is a veteran editor and journalist who has written about politics, economics and technology for newspapers as well Bloomberg News. He is a resident of Great Neck and was the Malaysia correspondent for the *Asian Wall Street Journal* and Canada correspondent for the *Dallas Times Herald*.



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David Zielenziger



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**Sammy Azarian**  
Associate at ABCNY Real-Estate & Development

... 2mo

Mr. David Zielenziger,

I have lived in Great Neck, New York. These accusations you're claiming are completely inaccurate, and FALSE. You're an ABSOLUTE jealous low life to put down the entire Persian community because the Mayor of Great Neck is now a Persian Jew. "Oh yeah - he is religious too, so you decide to pick on him and make FALSE & RIGID determinations pertaining... See more

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**Rodney Nassimian, E.I.T.**  
MEP Engineer

... 2mo

I may have been too lazy to vote for Dr. Bral, but thanks to this article, not only am I extremely motivated to go vote for him, I've also decided to drag all my kind hearted 'Great Neck Iranians' out to vote with me.

Thanks Mr. Zielenziger!

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