Chapter 10

Getting Settled in the Heartland: Community Formation among First- and Second-Generation Iranians in Iowa City, Iowa

Mohammad Chaichian

The 1979 Iranian revolution and establishment of the Islamic Republic led to a massive out-migration and creation of an Iranian Diaspora at the global level. Those who chose the United States as their final destination either settled in major urban centers and metropolitan areas in large numbers, or formed small ethnic communities in many states including Iowa. Although Iowa has never been a major destination for Iranian immigrants, a small contingent of about 700 Iranians has found Iowa to be their home. In an earlier study (Chaichian 1997), I focused on the problematic of cultural adjustment and segmented assimilation of the first generation Iranian immigrant community in Iowa City, a university town located in eastern Iowa. But the article in particular focused on the extent of this ethnic community’s integration into the host society’s culture on the one hand, and maintenance of Iranian cultural and ethnic identity on the other. Related to the former issue, more than half of respondents, both male and female, identified “adjustment to American society” and “social isolation and loneliness” as the two most pressing issues of concern for Iranians in the U.S. and Iowa. Based on the findings I concluded,

Thus, in spite of their educational, professional and economic successes, [first generation] Iranian immigrants’ increasing isolation, psychological depression, and loneliness may signal a more serious problem of the existence of a subtle
but pervasive form of prejudice and discrimination against them in rural areas on the one hand, and their failure to blend into the greater society on the other. (Chaichian 1997, 624-25)

As a follow-up to my earlier study of this ethnic immigrant community, in this chapter I will chronicle Iranian immigrants’ gradual adjustment to their new home and various dimensions of “settling in.” In particular, I will examine the processes of community formation for residents of Iranian ancestry by looking at settlement patterns; nature and types of their participation within their ethnic enclaves and their immediate urban environment; the role of Iowa’s only Iranian cultural association in community building; and the second generation’s role in short- and long-term community sustenance. Regarding the last factor, I will examine the interface between the second generation’s desire for professional achievement and personal fulfillment with the extent of their personal commitment to parents (first generation) and the Iranian community.

### Settlement Patterns of Iranians in the United States

In his study of settlement patterns of Iranian immigrants who arrived in the United States from 1975 to 1993 Modarres (1998, 38) finds that more than one-third have chosen the greater Los Angeles area as their place of residence. Other Iranian immigrants have been attracted to San Francisco, New York, and the Washington, D.C.-Baltimore conurbations, although their numbers have been less significant. In addition, Modarres documents that Iranian immigrants identified 7,194 ZIP codes, or one out of every four, as their place of residence. However, his further analysis indicates that only 264 ZIP codes had 100 or more Iranian immigrants, comprising a little more than half the immigrant population. More specifically, 17 percent of all Iranian immigrants resided in 15 ZIP codes, each with 1,000 or more residents.

Spatial patterns of settlements for Iranian immigrants in the United States have four distinct tendencies. First, during the 1980-1990 period Iranians seem to have had a clear preference for the western states, mainly California, followed by states in the northeastern and southern regions. However, during the 1990-2000 period Iranian immigrants both came in fewer numbers and showed a regional preference for southern states, the latter reason most likely being due to market demands and job opportunities. In contrast, during both decades fewer Iranian immigrants were attracted and absorbed by Midwestern states (see Table 10.1). Second, the majority of Iranian immigrants have settled in two main geographic areas, the greater Los Angeles-San Francisco urban area (in California) and the Boston-Washington conurbation (a continuous stretch of metropolitan areas on the East Coast that includes Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York). Third, Iranian immigrants have also chosen residence in selective urban centers outside these major conurbations. For example, cities with more than 1,000 Iranians include Seattle and Portland in the north-east region; Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, New Orleans and Miami in the south; and Minneapolis-St. Paul, Omaha, Kansas City, Chicago, Detroit and Cleveland in the Midwest. Fourth, although fewer in numbers and scattered spatially, Iranian immigrants have also chosen other less-populated and less urbanized states as their place of residence but have nonetheless resided in or near urban population centers. This is clearly the case for Iranians in Iowa. Based on the 1993 census data only 5 percent of 787 Iranians (44 individuals) resided in rural areas (Chaichian 1997, 615).

### Table 10.1 Regional Preferences of Persons of “Iranian” Ancestry in the United States, 1980-2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S.:</td>
<td>122,890</td>
<td>235,521</td>
<td>+91.6%</td>
<td>338,260</td>
<td>+43.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regions:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>52,116</td>
<td>123,496</td>
<td>+136.9%</td>
<td>182,938</td>
<td>+48.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>20,935</td>
<td>34,693</td>
<td>+65.7%</td>
<td>44,838</td>
<td>+29.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>31,635</td>
<td>50,109</td>
<td>+58.3%</td>
<td>82,004</td>
<td>+63.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest*</td>
<td>18,204</td>
<td>22,283</td>
<td>+22.4%</td>
<td>28,486</td>
<td>+27.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>607</td>
<td>787</td>
<td>+29.6%</td>
<td>698</td>
<td>-11.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*For regional data the 1980 census uses “North-Central” instead of “Midwest.”


In search of reasons for Iranian immigrants’ decision to reside in rural states Modarres (1998, 48) concludes that in most cases these states have made a concerted effort to enroll Iranian students in their colleges and universities, some of whom have found employment after graduation and have decided to stay. This has often been followed by reunification with their immediate families. This also partially explains the case for Iranians in Iowa, as I will discuss in the following section.
Settlement Patterns of Iranian Immigrants in Iowa

As stated earlier, most states in the Midwest have not been major destinations for Iranian immigrants due to both personal preferences and unavailability of desirable employment opportunities. Among Midwestern states, Iowa attracted its fair share of Iranians but could not retain them due to the previously mentioned factors, particularly during the 1990s (see Table 10.1). A review of census data for 1990 and 2000 reveals that not only Iranians in Iowa constitute a tiny portion of all Iranians in the United States; their numbers are also in decline (Table 10.2). For example, in 1990 there were 787 Iranians residing in Iowa, a meager 0.35 percent of all Iranians in the United States (Chaichian 1997, 615).

Table 10.2 Population Changes for Residents of Iranian Ancestry in Iowa Counties with a Major City or Metropolitan Area (1990-2000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Residents of Iranian Ancestry</th>
<th>Major City/ Metropolitan Areas</th>
<th>Major Educational Institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Hawk</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>-61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Des Moines</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>-36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dubuque</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>00</td>
<td>-23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>+131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>00</td>
<td>-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linn</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>-56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polk</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>+24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pottawatt</td>
<td>04</td>
<td>05</td>
<td>+01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>-142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Webster</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>05</td>
<td>-16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total for Iowa</td>
<td>787</td>
<td>698</td>
<td>-89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By 2000 only 698 Iranians (0.2 percent of Iranian immigrants) were still in residence, an 11.3 percent decline (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000). Iowa counties which have a sizeable Iranian population are those with either a major metropolitan area such as Polk (city of Des Moines and West Des Moines), or the ones with college towns and medical facilities such as Story, Johnson, and Blackhawk Counties (the home of Iowa State University, University of Iowa and affiliated hospitals and clinics, and University of Northern Iowa, respectively).

A comparison of 1990 and 2000 census data for Iowa counties with Iranian residents in Table 10.2 indicates the development of two spatial patterns of population movement. The first is a net out-of-state migration of eighty-nine Iranian residents or 11.3 percent of all Iranians in Iowa during the last decade of the twentieth century. The second emerging pattern is movement of the remaining Iranians between Iowa counties that has resulted in convergence of Iranian residents in and around three vibrant metropolitan areas—Iowa City (Johnson County), Cedar Rapids (Linn County), and Des Moines (Polk County). The first two form a fast-growing "urban corridor" in eastern Iowa, with an economy based on education and health care. Des Moines, the seat of state government, is a major hub for insurance industry in the region, and in addition, is a thirty-mile drive from Ames, the home to Iowa State University.

Table 10.3 Occupational/Professional Status of Iranian Immigrants in Southeastern Iowa and Iowa City

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation/Profession</th>
<th>S.E. Iowa 2004a</th>
<th>Iowa City 1994b</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Field</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>51.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer Science &amp; Engineering</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managerial</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salaried employees/wage earners</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total 49 99.7 24 99.7

Sources:
a. Based on a survey of membership list obtained from the Iranian Cultural Association of Iowa (ICAI), November 2004 (N= 65).
b. Based on a 1994 survey of Iowa City-Coralville Iranians (Chaichian 1997, N= 40).

The change of residence from rural counties to major metropolitan areas and urban corridors denotes a move toward further permanency for that portion of Iranian immigrants who have chosen to stay in Iowa. It is also an indication of this immigrant population's high level of education and skills, and their
interest in certain occupations that could only be offered in major urban centers. This is supported by two sets of data collected for southeastern Iowa and Iowa City-Coralville area (see Table 10.3). On the other hand, Iranian immigrants who have left Iowa are a part of the greater statewide out-migration of educated and skilled workers. According to a U.S. Census report, during the 1995-2000 period “Iowa lost 11,691 more college-educated residents ages 25 to 39 than it gained,” and in a state-wide headcount poll in 2000 more than 50 percent of college students indicated that they plan to leave Iowa after graduation. This puts Iowa above only North Dakota in the rate of out-migration (Jordan 2003). Thus related to the issue of community formation the remaining Iranian immigrants in Iowa are facing unique challenges in order to sustain the vitality of their tiny ethnic communities. What follows is a closer look at one such community in Iowa and its prospects for a long-term sustenance and survival.

Iranians in Iowa City: Settling In

Methodology

This study outlines the evolution of this immigrant population over the last two decades, and is based on my personal observations as a participant-observer and member of this ethnic immigrant community; careful examination and analysis of pertinent census data files for the past three decades at national, regional and state levels; findings of two surveys of small samples of first and second generation Iranians in Iowa City in 1994 and 1999; and a follow-up survey and interviews with second generation Iranians in 2003. I have defined second generation Iranians as “U.S.-born children with Iranian-born parents,” or “Iranian children born abroad who came to the United States before the age of twelve.” With the help of the Persian Student Organization (PSO), a student-run group at the University of Iowa, I sent a letter to all second generation members via e-mail, directing them to a Web page where they could fill out the questionnaire and submit it electronically. This technique was used to ensure confidentiality and facilitate data collection.

Aside from demographic and biographical questions, two dimensions of the second generation’s commitment to the Iranian community were identified, namely, their degree of attachment to the Iranian community and level of commitment to parents. The first was measured within the context of second generation’s participation in ethnic-specific events, the ethnic origins of their close friends, and their intention to stay in the Iowa City Hub after graduation. As for the second dimension, subjects were asked questions about the importance of staying close to one’s parents and their generation’s level of commitment to look after their aging and retired parents.

Formation of an Ethnic Community

With a population of 62,220 in 2000, Iowa City is the sixth largest city in the state and is home to the University of Iowa with a student population of 29,000. With close to 24,000 employees on its payroll, the University of Iowa is the largest employer in the Iowa City-Coralville hub which is also one of the fastest growing “urbanized areas” in Iowa. By the year 2000 the hub had a population of 83,697, of which 296 were individuals of Iranian ancestry. Yet while the Iowa City-Coralville hub’s population had a 13 percent growth during the 1990-2000 period, that of the Iranian population was 78.4 percent, an enormous growth in a state with declining native and Iranian immigrant populations.

Iranians in Iowa City are highly educated, making this immigrant community quite distinct compared to larger urban concentrations of Iranians such as the one in Los Angeles, California (see Bozorgmehr and Sabagh 1997). For example, 85 percent of first generation Iranians in the Iowa City Hub have a four-year college degree, 62 percent have master’s or equivalent degrees, and 33 percent hold doctorate or other professional degrees. These percentages are more than four times those for the U.S. population overall.

Like many other Iranian immigrant communities, it appears that the Iowa City community has grown out of the turbulent years of political and ideological clashes between various student and activist groups that polarized Iranians during the early years after the Iranian Revolution. For instance, while many Iranians in the early 1980s socialized along clearly drawn political boundaries (such as the left, the Monarchists and Islamic groups both opposing and supporting the Islamic Republic), the Iranian communities in the 1990s became more tolerant of and accommodating to political, ideological and religious diversity. The relative consolidation of various subgroups within the Iranian immigrant population of the United States is by no means an indication of the emergence of a cohesive and unified political block, but it can be considered as the first building block towards their integration into the host society culture.

In assessing the extent of adjustment and assimilation to the host culture it is crucial to study the process of community formation and its role in the sustenance of an ethnic immigrant population. One such study was conducted by Gilanshah (1990) in the Twin Cities area in Minnesota during the 1983-1989 period. Her findings indicated that a two-tiered Iranian community was established—an “Iranian-American community” comprised of those who immigrated prior to the hostage crisis and who have adopted parts of the host society’s culture; and a younger “Iranian student colony” whose members have resisted integration into the American society and who were ambivalent about socializing with the “older” Iranian-Americans.

In a similar fashion I have also identified three distinct groups among Iranians in Iowa City. The first group is comprised of first generation middle age and older immigrants and their second generation offspring form the core of Iranian community. They comprise of all Iranians thirty-five years and older and their families who know each other either through professional associations such
as the physicians and college and university faculty/employees, or through family ties and friendship networks. Out of this group a few came to the United States in the 1960s and early 1970s, and are considered the "elders" of the community. The rest have come to the United States in the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, the majority of them were students at American universities at the time who decided to stay in the United States on a permanent basis. Socialization among this group has mostly been based on social interests of both adults and children, and one can find several sub-groups with different needs and social interests.

The second group is comprised of first generation younger immigrants and the second generation implants who are mostly in their twenties and thirties. Among this group, some have come to the United States for higher education and professional training purposes, either from Iran or other countries where their immigrant parents reside; and others have moved to Iowa from other states. Like the "older" enclave this group is comprised of several subgroups of individuals and families of similar social tastes and professional interest. While those belonging to the first group are mostly settled and with established careers and professional ties within the community, members of the second group are mostly university and college students or recent graduates who will most likely follow the job market and move out of the community. What is more, after the 1979 Iranian revolution fewer Iranian students were allowed to come to the United States, further contributing to shrinkage of the second group in the Iowa City hub.15

The isolationists form the third group of Iranian immigrants. This last group is comprised of those who are married to Americans and have culturally drifted away from Iranian community;16 professionals who call themselves the "new implants" who have recently moved to Iowa City and its vicinity and have little or no contact with other Iranians; and some long-time residents who do not want to be associated with their Iranian compatriots for personal reasons.

Although the majority of Iranians in Iowa City are Muslims either by faith or by birth, most of them prefer to socialize with others on a secular and non-religious basis. Yet during the late 1980s and early 1990s there also existed a small Muslim enclave of Iranian families and individuals who observed all religious rituals and events within the Muslim faith, socialized with other devout Iranian and non-Iranian Muslims, attended religious ceremonies at the makeshift Islamic Center in town or the main mosque in nearby Cedar Rapids community, and taught their children the Holy Quran and appropriate codes of Islamic conduct. With the maturation of Iowa City Iranian community those families who have stayed have been dissolved into the Iranian niche and can no longer be identified separately on religious grounds.17

Socialization among members of the Iowa City Iranian enclave has also undergone two distinct phases of transformation that I call convergence and divergence.18 During the first phase that lasted up until the late 1990s, social gatherings were large-scale, included more families, and were more inclusive in terms of one's social status and economic class. However, as the first generation got older, became more established, and got more entrenched in the local economy this once seemingly cohesive community began to experience polarization along the lines of social class and personal interests. Thus in the past five years the second phase has been marked with a decline in number of private parties ("Dowrehs") in which a large and often incongruous group were invited, and an increase in small gatherings of few like-minded families who usually have similar social class backgrounds and interests.

Settlement Patterns in Iowa City

With further institutionalization and routinization of the Islamic government in Iran, many non-resident status Iranians decided to stay in the United States on a permanent basis and focused their attention on career and professional advancement. A distinct feature of the Iranian community in Iowa City is the prevalence of home owners over renters. For instance, with the exception of those who for the reason of their job requirements have a temporary residence in the Iowa City hub and are renters, almost all other Iranian families and individuals in the area are home owners.

As a measure of this ethnic community's socio-economic status and the degree of its integration into the city I will examine two indicators: 1) average value of homes owned by Iranian households, and 2) the extent of residential dispersion. Regarding the first indicator, a survey of twenty one homes owned by residents of Iranian ancestry in the Iowa City/Coralville MSA indicates that their assessed values in 2004 ranged from $119,410 to $990,380. The median value of these homes in 2004 was $194,670, compared with $144,458 for other residents identified as "white, not of Hispanic origin" and $133,147 for African American residents, placing Iranian residents in a much higher income bracket.19

Measuring the second indicator (degree of residential dispersion) for Iowa City Iranians, a survey of residential patterns for Iranian households indicates the heterolocal nature of residential units or absence of any preference for certain residential neighborhoods (formation of ethnic ghettos) that have been the characteristic of certain other immigrant populations (see Conzen 1979). Research indicates that lower class urban residents have a higher dependency on services provided in their immediate communities (Foley 1950) and also are more attached to their residential neighborhoods (Fried 1963). This can have particularly negative effects on an immigrant population's extent and pace of integration into the urban host community. For instance, in his study of ethnic residential patterns Lieberson (1963) found that residentially segregated ethnic groups were:
More sharply differentiated in their occupational composition, more deviant in patterns of occupational mobility, less likely to become American citizens, less likely to speak English and more likely to be endogamous (Yancey et al. 1976, 398).

Clearly, this is not the case for Iranians in the Iowa City-Coralville hub. In the absence of an ethnic immigrant “critical mass,” there are no local businesses owned by Iranians that normally cater to specific needs of the Iranian community, in contrast to larger cities like Chicago, Washington, D.C., or Los Angeles. Likewise, those who can be identified as “working class” Iranians in Iowa City are not typical workers, as most hold a bachelor’s or higher level educational degree.

The concept of heterolocalism was first used by Zelinsky and Lee (1998, 285) who questioned the validity of “assimilationist” and “pluralist” assumptions, and instead offered an alternative model for an immigrant population’s settlement patterns. In their assessment, heterolocalism is a late twentieth century phenomenon with at least three distinct attributes: an immediate dispersion of immigrants within the host society; separation of place of work and residence; and presence of strong community ties among immigrant population, partially due to new electronic means of communication.

As is illustrated in Figure 10.4, only two homes owned by residents of Iranian ancestry (designated by black circles) are located in census tracts that have areas of “concentrated poverty.” But it has to be noted that these tracts include the downtown area and older housing stock that have special appeal in a university town. Thus in most cases the higher median value of homes owned by Iranians is also translated into their preferences for urban tracts that cater to above average and high income bracket residents. In light of the small size of Iowa City’s Iranian community it is not possible to calculate indices of dissimilarity or exposure. However, Iowa City does not seem to be a segregated city even for newer immigrant populations with larger numerical representation.

The heterolocal residential pattern for Iranian residents can also be explained by two important social factors. First, my research findings, based on two samples of first- and second generation Iranians in this community, indicate that despite their real and perceived ethnic and cultural differences with a host society of predominantly “white” European background, both groups report having a positive experience of living in Iowa with few or rare incidences of prejudice and overt discrimination either at school or in seeking employment. For instance, in a survey of a small sample of second generation Iowa City Iranians in January 2005 (N=15), almost all subjects responded that they have “never or rarely” been discriminated against while seeking employment or promotion, as well as by their employers and co-workers. Second, in a 1994 survey of first generation Iowa City Iranians, 86 percent responded that they have “never or rarely” been discriminated against in housing because of their national or ethnic origin.

In presenting their heterolocal model, Zelinsky and Lee (1998, 285-286) correctly attribute this to the “affluence of many of these foreign-born newcomers,” the “enactment of fair housing legislation,” and “significant shifts in public attitudes and perceptions” that in turn have reduced spatial barriers between new and old residents.

Figure 10.4 Location of 22 Residences Owned by Iranians within the Census Tract Boundaries for Iowa City-Coralville-North Liberty Metro Areas (2005). Black dots indicate areas of concentrated poverty.

The Role of the Iranian Cultural Association of Iowa in Community Formation and Maintenance

With the decline of political factionalism and ideological conflict characteristic of pre- and post-Revolution period (between 1978 and the mid-1980s) and relative stability in the Islamic republic in Iran, the political and ideological differences lost their practical social appeal for many Iranians outside Iran, particularly in the United States. In major American cities such as Los Angeles, Washington, DC, and Chicago a declining political activism was replaced by ad hoc Iranian cultural associations which were formed to bring Iranians closer together by promoting social and cultural causes.
Earlier observations by Gilanshah (1990) on the Iranian immigrant community of about 3,000 in the Twin Cities area indicate a clear tendency for the maintenance of Iranian culture and ethnic identity through the organizing of various social and cultural activities instead of forming groups based on political factionalism. In yet another study of Iranians in Los Angeles, Moslehi (1984) provides evidence for the importance of a growing organizational consciousness among Iranians, that may indicate both a need and a desire to create a sense of cultural connectedness by maintaining an “Iranian” community. This is also the case in Iowa City, as one no longer can identify “political enclaves” but divisions along family and social interests as well as professional affinities.

Among the larger Iranian communities in Iowa, the one in Iowa City has been most active in sustaining its ethnic and cultural identity. After several failed attempts (mainly by long time Iranian residents) the Iranian Cultural Association of Iowa (ICAI) was formed in Iowa City in the fall of 1993. A core group of about twenty-five individuals selected a president, vice president, and a secretary and approved the association’s by-laws. Since then, ICAI has held poetry reading nights, established a Sunday Farsi school for children, and organized festivities marking major secular Iranian holidays such as Nowruz (the Iranian New Year and rite of Spring) and Mehregan (harvest fest). The Nowruz celebration in March 2005 attracted about 160 residents of Iranian ancestry and their guests from Iowa City and other cities within hundred mile radius in eastern and central Iowa. Outside community boundaries, the association has spearheaded at least two fundraising campaigns to help victims of natural disasters such as the 2003 Bam earthquake in Iran.

Some ICAI members in Iowa City have also made inroads into Iowa’s political landscape through informal lobbying and fundraising efforts in support of state politicians. Of note is the proclamation of March 21st by Iowa’s governor as “Persian Heritage Day” in 2001 and again in 2003; and a fundraising event to support the re-election of current Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack. The Iranian community in Iowa City has therefore assumed a de facto leadership in bringing Iranian immigrants in the region closer together, as well as taking the first steps towards the immigrant group’s secondary assimilation into host society. Furthermore, in spite of the heterolocal nature of residences and the increasing polarization of families along the lines of social class and personal interests, the Iowa City Iranian community has maintained its ethnic integrity in great part due to the role played by the ICAI. In rejecting the earlier models of ethnic community that considered “ethnic concentration” in urban “ghettos” a necessary means of survival, Conzen (1979, 013) argues that:

Under twentieth century conditions, even a structured ethnic community can maintain close patterns of interaction without residential concentration, and ethnicity defined by either cultural inheritance or interest is likewise independent of residence.

This is certainly the case for the heterolocal Iranian immigrant community that is brought together by an overarching cultural association. In this context, one cannot discount the increasing role played by electronic communication such as the internet and electronic mail (e-mail) for information dissemination; networking; fund-raising; and other organizational objectives, as well as increasing popularity of ethnic-oriented satellite programming that is connecting members of ethnic communities in ways that were unimaginable even ten years ago (see also Zeiński and Lee 1998, 288-289). This new “virtual ethnic community” supersedes old forms of social interaction within and between ethnic communities, a tool that is comfortably used by the ICAI in the Iowa City hub.

Despite strong initial support given by a considerable number of Iranian families and individuals to establish the Cultural Association in the early 1990s, ICAI has increasingly become a one-person endeavor, at least in the past few years. Although members have kept the association financially afloat through membership fees and generous donations, when it comes to organizational planning and sponsoring cultural events most members take a back seat and rely on the ICAI’s president. Thus the ICAI faces an uncertain and unstable future due to a combination of factors such as a lack of cooperative effort, reluctance of community members to carry the torch, and a fast-aging first generation immigrant population.

It is important to note that secular voluntary associations that are geared toward philanthropic objectives and helping mostly newer group members with limited resources did not have strong roots in Iranian culture, and hence have not played a significant role in adjustment of Iranian immigrants in the United States (see also Bozorgmehr 1998, 24). Similarly, at the local level the Iowa City Iranian community’s unique socioeconomic characteristics such as high levels of education, skills, and income have not been conducive to formation of such voluntary associations. However, small informal self-help groups have emerged among more affluent Iowa City Iranians who in most cases have collaborated on economic projects and investment opportunities, particularly in real estate and related activities.

The Role of Second Generation Iranians in Community Sustenance and Continuity in Iowa City

A recent census report released in 2004 indicates that sixty-eight out of ninety-nine Iowa counties lost population between 2000 and 2003 (Morrison 2004). Of those with a net population gain, Johnson and Linn counties (with county seats Iowa City and Cedar Rapids, respectively) were among the top five. According to one report the Iowa City-Cedar Rapids corridor is the “brightest spot” of urban growth in eastern Iowa that is “bucking the trend by luring young people for education and keeping them with jobs.” The report also indicates that young
people have ranked this urban corridor as Iowa’s “coolest” urban area, offering its residents a myriad of cultural events and “about a thousand coffee shops and bars” (Jordan 2003).

The preceding exaggerated account of this urban community’s “cool” qualities is obviously based partly on a desire to market the area to newcomers and partly on the younger population’s experience in the community. Yet small communities can attract those who seek employment only if there are available and relatively secure long-term jobs. Within this context, the Iowa City Iranian community’s considerable numerical increase in the last decade is mostly due to educational and training opportunities offered by the University of Iowa and its affiliated teaching hospital and clinics. However, it does not appear that there are long-term employment options for this population cohort. This is supported by findings of my survey of forty-two second-generation Iranians related to their employment choices and options in 2004. While almost all (95.2 percent) of second generation individuals pursued their post-secondary education in the Iowa City hub, of those working only two (14.4 percent) were employed locally and the rest (twelve individuals) were hired elsewhere.

At the same time, first generation Iranians have had considerable stability and job security which in turn has kept most of them in Iowa. For instance, among those Iranians who have left the Iowa City community (and Iowa) during the last ten years (1995-2005), there were only two first-generation families who followed their children after they graduated and secured employment elsewhere. Based on the preceding observation it appears that the long-term sustenance and viability of ethnic Iranian communities in small towns will in large part depend on the extent and nature of intergenerational interdependence, with the second generation playing a crucial role.

The Second Generation: Asset or Liability for Long-Term Community Sustenance?

In an interesting discussion on the question of “Iranian identity” and the way Iranians have wrestled with it after the Arab invasion and the Sassanids’ defeat in the seventh century, Mesoob (1992, 44) convincingly argues that Iranians “discovered” their distinctive identity vis-a-vis an invading Arab army and its imperialist culture. This consciousness of one’s cultural or national identity, argues Mesoob, is a reaction to another set of cultural values which appear to be an overpowering entity at the time:

In essence, identity is a reactive matter. Attention to self becomes meaningful in relation to others and from being with them. Being oneself means not being another. It means having differences from another, and preserving separateness and distance while enjoying links or even intermingling. This perception is proper to human beings as social animals. Since it accrues meaning through

and from others, they are naturally stimulated to greater attention to their own identity.

Mesoob’s argument appears to be valid for contemporary Iranian immigrants and exiles as well. But an interesting dimension of the first generation’s understanding of their ethnic identity is their realization that to maintain “ethnic purity” in a multi-ethnic society is impractical, if not impossible, particularly as it pertains to raising their offspring. To be more clear, first generation parents come to realize that in relative terms members of second generation are better equipped to interact with the host culture and in turn better received by others, hence rendering “reactivity” almost obsolete, pertaining to one’s ethnic identity. Related to Iowa City first generation Iranians, in an earlier study I reported that 77 percent of my sample stated “they are ‘fully committed’ to instilling a sense of ethnic pride and identity in their children.” Yet 30 percent also expressed their approval of exogamous unions for their children, and 37 percent indicated that they will respect their children’s decision (now or in the future) to marry outside the Iranian ethnic population (Chaichian 1997, 623). Thus, using the preceding example we may conclude that despite their rigidity and a relatively conservative approach to the question of cultural identity, first generation Iranians take a more liberal position when it comes to their children’s independent judgment and their future plans. This, coupled with parents’ higher-than-average socio-economic status makes this Iranian community a special case that probably will not be representative of other communities with a larger and more heterogeneous concentration of residents of Iranian ancestry.

In order to examine the extent of second generation’s commitment to their parents and their cultural attachment to this small urban multi-ethnic Iranian enclave, in January 2005 I administered a survey to members of Persian Student Organization (PSO), a student-run group at the University of Iowa with the majority of its members being second generation Iranians. The respondents’ pool consisted of seven second generation females and eight males, with eight respondents indicating their interest in being interviewed in person.

Respondents’ age ranged between eighteen and thirty-two, with a mean age of twenty-four. In terms of educational level, all but except one were enrolled at, or graduated from, a local college or the University of Iowa. Twenty-seven percent (four individuals) held Master’s degree or higher, with another 33 percent (five individuals) holding bachelor’s degrees. The survey’s findings relative to the second generation’s commitment to the Iranian community are discussed below. It is important to note that the small sample size will not warrant any definite conclusions.

The Second Generation’s Degree of Attachment to the Iranian Community

One indicator of the second generation’s attachment to its ethnic enclave is the
extent of their participation in events organized by the Iranian community. Three types of activities were identified for this survey. First, the annual event in celebration of the Iranian New Year (Nowruz) usually takes place on or before March 21st in Iowa City, bringing most Iranian families and individuals together. This ancient secular “rites of spring” event is celebrated in two different nights, one organized by the first generation and the other by the second generation. Second, several traditional events of lesser importance are also observed by Iranians, mostly the first generation, such as Mehregan (full harvest fest), and Yalda (observance of the year’s longest night). Finally, there are private parties organized by families who mostly invite a select group of friends and relatives, and other parties organized by second generation individuals that cater to the younger generation. Second generation Iranians seem to be more attracted to all three types of events organized by their peers, but also desire to maintain their close ties with parents and other older members of the community by at least attending the annual new year’s party. As one eighteen-year-old female respondent put it, “up until ninth grade I was encouraged and sometimes pressured by my parents to attend, but now I go on my own since all my friends are going too” (see Table 10.4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Event</th>
<th>Never (#)</th>
<th>Rarely (#)</th>
<th>Sometimes (#)</th>
<th>Often (#)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attend Nowruz parties organized by 1st generation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend Nowruz parties organized by 2nd generation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend Seездab Behdar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend Mehregan</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend Yalda night</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend 1st generation parties</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend 2nd generation parties</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend PSO parties</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10.4 Second Generation’s Level of Participation in Various Events organized by the Iranian Community (N=15)

Overall, second generation Iranians demonstrate a positive attitude toward their “Iranian” side and also have a positive perception of their Iranian identity. For instance, respondents were asked to rate changes in self-perception and others’ perception of their “Iranian” ethnic identity, particularly in the aftermath of September 11 events. While nine respondents (out of fifteen) rated changes in their self-perception as “highly positive” or “positive,” an equal number also indicated that changes in others’ perception has been “highly negative” or “negative.” In an earlier study of Iranian American communities Ansari (1992, 132) also observed the negative correlation between Iranians’ self perception and others’ perception of their ethnicity and its role in strengthening Iranian ethnic identity:

The dialectically interrelated anti-western action in Iran and anti-Iranian reaction in America not only transferred the already available marginal identity to a much larger group, but also reinforced the development of a new community.

This remarkable boost in the second generation’s self-perception despite an increased negative attitude toward their ethnicity is partly a reflection of their higher-than-average social class and hence their higher level of self-confidence. In a study of ethnic and racial identities of second generation black immigrants in New York City, Waters (1994, 803-804) identifies four factors that help the second generation develop a positive perception of their ethnic identity: a middle or upper class upbringing; attending better schools; parents’ involvement in ethnic voluntary organizations; and a more stable family structure. As discussed earlier, all four factors apply to second generation Iranians.

Another indicator of second generation’s attachment to their ethnic community is their level of socialization both within and outside the ethnic enclave. Survey findings indicate that close friendship relations are established with both Iranians and others alike. For instance, nine individuals (out of fifteen) reported having three or more Iranian “close friends,” and equal numbers also indicated having close friendship ties with Americans of European origin. Also of note, is considerably high number of close friends from among traditionally identified ethnic/racial minorities, such as African Americans, Asians, and Hispanics. Although there are no indications of overt prejudice and discrimination on the part of European Americans against second generation Iranians, some respondents find themselves being closer to ethnic minorities on both cultural and political grounds. For example, a teenage male college student responded to have three or more close friends from among black and Asian Americans and yet none among Americans of European origin. When asked about the reasons during our interview, he was quick to mention that he has “a lot more in common” with the former and “differences in political views” with the latter.

Despite respondents’ clear interest in, and attachment to tradition and events organized by the Iranian community, their ethnically diverse network of close friends speaks of their undifferentiated attitude in socialization that is not bound by their parents and tradition. This desire and ability to expand their social network is also manifested in their future plans and intentions once they are graduated. For instance, ten individuals in the sample indicated that they will “definitely not” stay in Iowa City after graduation, and only two individuals (both females) responded that they will remain in the area only if “they find a
more enriching urban and social environments. More than a decade ago in his study of the formation of Iranian communities in the United States Ansari (1992, 133) predicted that a “rapidly Americanizing” second generation “... will probably only last for one generation.” Although the very small sample size prevents us from making any definite conclusions, looking at the second generation’s overall levels of community attachment and commitment to parents, it can be argued that this small Iranian-American community has a limited chance, if any, of a long-term and sustained inter-generational survival.

Conclusion

A quarter century has passed since the 1979 Iranian revolution, and the Iranian immigrants who chose the United States for their final destination have formed ethnic communities of variable size in most states including Iowa. Notwithstanding the remarkable achievements and indications that Iranian immigrants are fast approaching the stage of permanency in the United States, there are signs that limited availability of economic and career opportunities in small urban communities such as Iowa city has not been conducive to the sustenance of a multi-generational Iranian community, as evidenced by out-migration of the second generation members in their pursuit of career and socio-cultural objectives. In addition, with the majority of first generation Iranians reaching retirement age, and given the strong cultural and emotional ties between first generation immigrant parents and their offspring, the long-term viability of this immigrant community is seriously questioned. As I indicated earlier, in my first study of first generation Iowa City Iranians 52 percent of men and 47 percent of women identified “social isolation and loneliness” as the second most pressing social problem facing Iranians in the United States, making out-migration of second generation individuals even more problematic (see Chaichian 1997, 625). Although limited in scope, survey findings and interviews with second generation members indicate that their eventual departure will most likely be followed by out-migration of at least part of first generation Iranian families who will follow their offspring to new destinations. Thus the Iowa City Iranian community’s uncertain future is not because of first generation’s lack of commitment and resolve. Rather, it is the second generation’s understandable desire to pursue its long-term objectives beyond the confines of this small metropolitan enclave that will eventually undermine the long-term stability of this Iranian American community in small town America. The reader is cautioned, however, that due to the study’s small sample size and higher-than-average levels of income and education for first and second generation Iowa City Iranians, the findings in this case study may not be applicable to other Iranian American communities.

Extent of the Second Generation’s Commitment to Tend to Their Aging Parent’s Needs

The second generation’s interest in sustaining the Iranian community in the Iowa City hub was examined by measuring their desire to remain close with their parents, as well as their commitment to take care of them once their parents have retired. Only eleven respondents in the sample had their parents in the area, and none of them indicated that staying close to parents is a “very important” concern. Furthermore, while three individuals felt it is “important” to be with their parents, four respondents considered the issue as “not important.” Yet all eleven individuals responded that they are “fully committed” or “committed” to look after their aging parents despite their desire to move elsewhere. During my interviews with several respondents it became clear that all are very close to their parents and quite passionate about their well-being, and a female respondent expressed her disdain even about the thought of “leaving her aging parents behind in a nursing home” in the future.

The contradictory nature of the two sets of responses above can be partially explained by another finding during the interviews, as five individuals (out of eleven whose parents were residing in Iowa City) predicted their parents will also leave Iowa City either immediately after their children have left or right after their retirement. Another partial explanation is parents’ overall economic security and higher-than-average socio-economic status that may have influenced the second generation’s opinion on this issue. All things considered, it is clear that second generation Iranians are both capable and willing to leave their parents and the Iowa City community behind in search of better jobs or a desirable job.” Furthermore, when asked for reasons from those who intend to leave Iowa, the majority indicated they desire to move to larger cities in order to have access to more cultural events. Half the respondents also wanted to move to larger cities that have higher concentration of Iranians. Finally, related to job opportunities, only two individuals believed that there is a shortage of available jobs in Iowa, and yet eight responded they will go where the job opportunities take them. This desire to “move on” is best expressed in a farewell letter written by a second generation Iranian and long-time Iowa City resident to all “dear friends” before leaving Iowa City for Chicago in early 2005:

I just got a job offer in Chicago, although I enjoyed living in Iowa City, but I felt like it is time to move on! Maybe Helen Keller was right when she said “Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.” . . . I moved to Iowa City almost 20 years ago and have worked for the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics for over 15 years, but what I did not expect was meeting so many kind, sweet, warm and passionate people (and I had no family members in this country therefore you were my family) (Rasteh, 2005).
Notes

1. Iowa City is a moderate-sized university town that is home to the largest concentration of this ethnic group in the state of Iowa.

2. Male/female responses to these issues were 68 percent and 60 percent for the former, and 52 percent and 47 percent for the latter, respectively (Chaichian, 1997, 624).


4. Based on INS data for the 1983-1993 period. The respondent pool included both newly arrived Iranians as well as those who adjusted their non-immigrant status to immigrant.

5. This includes both Iran-born immigrants as well as those who were born to (one or both) Iranian parents in the United States.

6. Census data show Johnson County where the University of Iowa is located, and Story County with Iowa State University in Ames as its main center of urban population, were among top five counties for net population gain overall. Other counties were Dallas, Jasper, and Linn (Jordan, 2003).

7. I am grateful to Ali Rezaie, an active board member of the Iranian Cultural Association of Iowa (ICAI) for providing me with valuable information about ICAI membership (see Table 3).

8. Readers are cautioned about my peculiar relationship with many members of this ethnic immigrant community which is based on close interaction, friendship, and socialization, definitely affecting my "objectivity" in conducting research. However, some social scientists also recognize the benefits gained by the researcher's immersion in the social environments they are studying, or what is referred to as "insider understanding" (see for example, Loftand and Loftand 1995:61).

9. I am indebted to Sahar Kashi, PSO's President, without whose support this project would not have been possible. I would also like to express my gratitude to Marilyn Murphy, Director of Library Services at Mount Mercy College who designed and administered the questionnaire for electronic dispatch and data collection.

10. It’s important to note that although I use the term “Iranian” in its generic form, it does not imply that any community of “Iranian” ancestry is a homogeneous one. Iran is a diverse, multi-ethnic society with at least eight major ethnic groups that have a long history of interaction not devoid of socio-economic and political conflicts. Thus even a tiny “Iranian” ethnic community such as the one in Iowa City is ethnically heterogeneous by nature.


13. According to a recent study conducted by the Iranian Studies Group (ISG) at MIT in Cambridge, MA, 26 percent of Iranian Americans have Master's degree or higher. This compares with 61.6 percent for Iranian Americans residing in Iowa City (See “Iranian-Americans Among the Most Educated in the U.S.,” http://www.payvand.com/news/03/oct/1169.html. (Accessed 20 March 2005).

14. The following categories are based on my observation of intra-group relations among Iranians in Iowa City during the 1993-2005 period.

15. For instance, the number of “non-immigrant” Iranian students (holding F-1, J-1 and tourist visas) admitted to the University of Iowa declined from 33 in 1988 to 10 in 1994 (Data supplied to the Institute of International Education, “The Open Doors Survey: 1988-94,” Office of International Education, the University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa).

16. In a pioneering study of the process of dual marginality among first generation Iranian professional immigrants, Ansari (1975) calls this group “settlers” or “Persian Yankees,” who were receptive of the host society’s cultural values and had made up their minds to stay.

17. It has to be noted that some members of this small subgroup received scholarships from the Iranian Government and allegedly refrained from socializing with other secular Iranians on the assumption that secularists do not sympathize with the Iranian Government and Islamic movement in Iran. Thus partly on religious and partly on ideological grounds, this small group of Iranians dissociated itself from the larger immigrant community in town.

18. As a member of the Iowa City Iranian community I have had the privilege of an insider’s view, that is based on both personal observation and evolving with other members of this immigrant community in the past thirteen years.

19. The median home value for whites and African Americans is calculated based on 2000 values ($144,458 and $133,147, respectively), assuming an average 3 percent rate of inflation/year.

20. Their model is based on a critique of both “assimilationist” and “pluralist” models, the former assuming a two-stage housing pattern of clustering-dispersion for immigrants depending on their level of assimilation, and the latter conceptualizing the formation of a “spatial mosaic” of ethnic enclaves in metropolitan areas (see Zelinsky and Lee 1998:282-283).

21. In 2004 census tracts 11, 16 and 21 were all areas of concentrated poverty, where “greater than or equal to 40 percent of the population lived at poverty level.” See Scattered Site Housing Taskforce (2004).

22. The Dissimilarity Index (D), measures whether one particular group is distributed across census tracts in the same way as another group; and the Exposure Index (P) refers to the racial/ethnic composition of the tract where the average number of a given group lives.

23. For instance, in the year 2000 Hispanics comprised 1.42 percent of city’s population (1,581 individuals) yet they resided in census tracts whose Mexican ancestry population was on average two percent of the total. The dissimilarity index for Mexican ancestry versus the non-Hispanic white population was 28, a fairly low index (Hispanic Population and Residential Segregation: Iowa City, Census 2000).

24. In the 2005 survey of second generation Iranians I did not ask about housing discrimination.

25. However, 47 percent of respondents reported being discriminated against “all the time” or “sometimes” in seeking employment (N=40).

26. On this issue see also Ansari (1992, 136).

27. Despite its successful start and enthusiastic support by both parents and children, the Sunday Persian school was discontinued after two years, mostly due to a growing resistance by students (second generation).

28. An interesting emerging pattern is increasing participation of non-Iranians in these festivities. For example, of the 160 participants in the 2005 Noruz party 48 guests were non-Iranians, mostly friends and/or relatives of American spouses, including 40 native Iowans of “European origin,” 7 Afghans, and one Iraqi immigrant.
29. Most communication among ICAl members is done via e-mail, and the association maintains a website that is kept up-to-date by one of the ICAl board members (see http://iowairan.com).

30. Personal interview with Abbas Rezayazdi, ICAl’s president, 23 March, 2005, Iowa City, Iowa.

31. Johnson County is home to the University of Iowa and its affiliated teaching hospital and clinics. Two private colleges, Mount Mercy and Coe, and Kirkwood Community College, are located in Linn County.

32. I am greatly indebted to the following members of the Iranian-American community for their willingness to be interviewed and sharing their insights on this issue with me: Yashar Chahichian, Marian Halaei, Ali Jabbari, Sarvarz Jabbari, Diana Mina, Rose Rezai, and Iman Vasef.

33. This corresponds with the national average for Iranian Americans. See the ISG report: http://www.payvand.com/news/03/0ct/1169.htm.

34. This is in stark contrast with first generation Iranians’ socialization outside the ethnic enclave. In an earlier study of first generation Iranians in Iowa City (Chahichian 1997, 622), I reported that about half the respondents reported to have “close American friends.” But during personal interviews it became clear that most of their close “American” friends were those of non-European origin.

35. Out of a total of fifteen, ten respondents reported having one or more African American, six having Hispanic, and twelve having Asian “close friends.”

36. Based on the 2000 census data, the three ethnic/racial minorities comprise five, seven, and four percent of Iowa City- Coralville hub’s population, respectively. See The 2000 Community Profile for Iowa City, http://www.icgov.org/documents/demoinfo.pdf (accessed 20 March 2005).

37. It is important to note that most, but not all parents of second generation Iranians reside in the Iowa City area.

38. Also of note is the second generation Iranians’ positive experience in Iowa city, as none of those who intend to leave indicated that they are leaving Iowa in order to escape from prejudice and discrimination aimed at Iranians.

39. Of the eleven respondents whose parents are in Iowa City area, four identified their parents’ social class as “upper class” and the rest considered them as “middle class.” For the Iowa City first generation Iranis’ socio-economic status also see Chahichian (1997, 615-16).

40. The first pressing issue was “adjustment to American society.”

References


