The Iranians of the Twin Cities*

by

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The *Harvard Encyclopedia of Ethnic Groups* in America lists the Iranian Americans as among the least studied ethnic groups in the annals of American ethnicity. At the same time, it is especially deserving of research as one of the more recent ethnic groups from the developing world and a group whose fate has been shaken by two major crises of the 1970s: the oil crisis and the hostage crisis when members of the American embassy were seized by students, at the time of the late Shah was given temporary asylum for medical treatment in the United States. Among other things the fate of the Iranian ethnic group potentially illustrates what may happen when a guest people’s problems are complicated by international incidents between their country of origin and their host country.

The social behaviorist theory of ethnic community stretching from its founder, Max Weber, to such contemporary representatives as Don Martindale, was drawn upon for a body of explanations to account for the potential formation of an Iranian-American community among Iranians, who number between 1,000 and 1,500 of the Twin Cities, Minneapolis-St. Paul. This theory treats community not as an entity, but a process, a

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movement toward systematic integration in the intra- and interaction of members of an ethnically distinct population which finds itself as guests of another country. This theory treats the core of the ethnic community to lie in institutions of socialization (the family, religion, education) and promoted both by an interest by co-nationals in preserving their roots or cultural heritage, and surviving in a partial alien environment of the host society and culture.

A multi-dimensional research design, comprising both qualitative and quantitative procedures, was carried out on Twin City Iranians. Extensive participant observation studies were performed, extensive open ended interviews were conducted, a questionnaire was designed comprising a series of attitude scales, and a sample of some 108 respondents worked up of whom an analytical survey of community-forming processes was made.

Beyond any question the research proved that the formation of a two-centered ethnic community has been taking shape among Twin City Iranians: the outlines of an Iranian-American community more or less obeying the same general laws as other "hyphenated" ethnic communities of other types of earlier foreign migrants to America is taking shape among those Iranians who came to the area before the hostage crisis; and also a distinct and active Iranian student colony has formed whose members are not inclined, at present, to view themselves as Iranian-Americans and who have somewhat ambivalent interactions with the older Iranian Americans.

In this internal tension between the sub-forms of Iranian community formation in the Twin Cities, the oil and hostage crises seem to have played a major role.