

Cultural migration: Networks of Iranian Organizations in the Netherlands

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Abstract

While distrust and divisiveness amongst Iranians in different diaspora environments have been commonly acknowledged, there are additional indications suggesting that Dutch-Iranian organizations are relatively scarce. In this article, we compare the organizational networks of Dutch-Iranians to those of Turks and Moroccans in the Netherlands. The results show that organization density is lower and fragmentation higher for Dutch-Iranians. We explain this by Iranian forms of organization, which have been transplanted to and interact with the diaspora. However, Dutch-Iranians are also exceptionally well integrated in the Dutch society. This puts the relationship between integration and ethnic organization into question.

Keywords: Dutch Iranians; organization networks; political culture.

Introduction

There has been a great deal of debate about Iranian organizations in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, the number and nature of these organizations has never been fully corroborated. On the basis of qualified estimates, literature on the Iranian diaspora, and their online networks, it can be presumed that these organizations are scarce and weakly linked (van den Bos 2006). This is highly surprising, since Iranians are exceptionally well integrated in the Dutch soci-

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ety (Webmagazine Statistics Netherlands 2006). For instance, Iranians with regular employment number remarkably high relative to other refugee groups (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau [...] 2005: 82). The Iranian case, therefore, apparently casts doubt on the relationship between the integration of migrants and their ethnic social capital (cf. Krane 2004). This article examines networks of Iranian organizations in the Netherlands – their minimal size and cohesion – and aims to explain the pattern of scarce networks and advanced integration by Iranian organization culture.

The term ‘Dutch-Iranian’ refers to individuals living in the Netherlands whose mother or father was born in Iran. On 1st January 2006, there were 28,722 Dutch-Iranians registered as living in the country (Statistics Netherlands 2006, hereafter: SN). Iranians in the Netherlands are among the so-called new ethnic groups: in comparison to Turks, Moroccans, and Surinamese their arrival is more recent and stems from specific factors. They mainly migrated to the Netherlands as political refugees after the 1978/9 revolution (Verkuyten & Nekuee 1999: 287), and mostly applied for asylum between 1981 and 1995 (van den Tillaart 2000: 84). The Netherlands remained a key migration destination in the period 1997-2001 when more Iranians applied for asylum in the Netherlands than in Sweden or France (Hessels 2004), which are countries with larger Iranian diaporas. Iranian immigration to the Netherlands has, however, declined since 2001. Dutch-Iranians comprise a varied group from the point of view of ethnicity, political orientation and religion (Hessels 2002: 20).

Two theory clusters guide our approach. The first concerns network size and connection density: the aforementioned assumption that Dutch-Iranian organizations are scarce and weakly connected. The Dutch Interior Ministry has observed that there is a low degree of organization among Iranians and a lack of collaboration between these organizations (Hessels 2002: 24). In addition, divisiveness is frequently mentioned in the scholarly literature on Iranians in diaspora environments (e.g., Sanadjian 2000).

Secondly, the question arises as to which factors explain the exceptional Iranian pattern of limited organization and advanced integration. Tilly's elevated statement that 'networks migrate' (1990) serves as a starting point. However, this must be broadened and interpreted in terms of organization culture. The specific pattern mentioned above results from the interaction of Iranian forms of organization with the migration context.

Our data was collected in two stages. Information about Iranian organizations and their board members largely derives from Van den Bos' examination of Dutch Chamber of Commerce files between March 2003 and June 2005. The second stage involved a survey among Iranian board members conducted by Achbari and Van den Bos between March and July 2006 (cf. Achbari 2006). This survey examined contacts among Iranian organizations as an additional network measure to board member interlock data.

Dutch Iranian organizations

The degree of organization among Dutch-Iranian organizations may be measured externally with regard to the Dutch-Iranian population or internally with respect to the level of their networks. The external measure concerns organization density (organization numbers in relation to the population); internally, a range of measures is available to assess compactness (among which network density, centralization, and fragmentation).

In 2006, the estimated number of Iranian organizations (74) was far lower than for Turkish and Moroccan organizations (1125 and 720 respectively) (van Heelsum et al. 1999: 11; van Heelsum 2001: 8) More importantly, the relative degree of organization density for Dutch-Iranians in the Netherlands is also low (2.57) in comparison with that of Turks and Moroccans (3.52 en 2.65) (see Table 1).

NETWORKS OF IRANIAN ORGANIZATIONS

Table 1. Organization and network density

	Turks (1999)	Moroccans (2001)	Iranians (2006)
population	319,600	272,000	28,722
organizations	1125 ¹⁾	720 ²⁾	74
organization density ³⁾	3.52	2.65	2.57
interlocks (lines)	441 ⁴⁾	189 ⁴⁾	14
network density ⁵⁾	0.001	0.001	0.005

1) Van Heelsum (1999: 11); 2) Van Heelsum (2001: 8); 3) Organizations/Population x 1,000; 4) Van Heelsum (2005: 23); 5) Network density is computed on the basis of the undirected network of overlapping board members: $2l/n(n-1)$ (Wasserman and Faust 1997: 182).

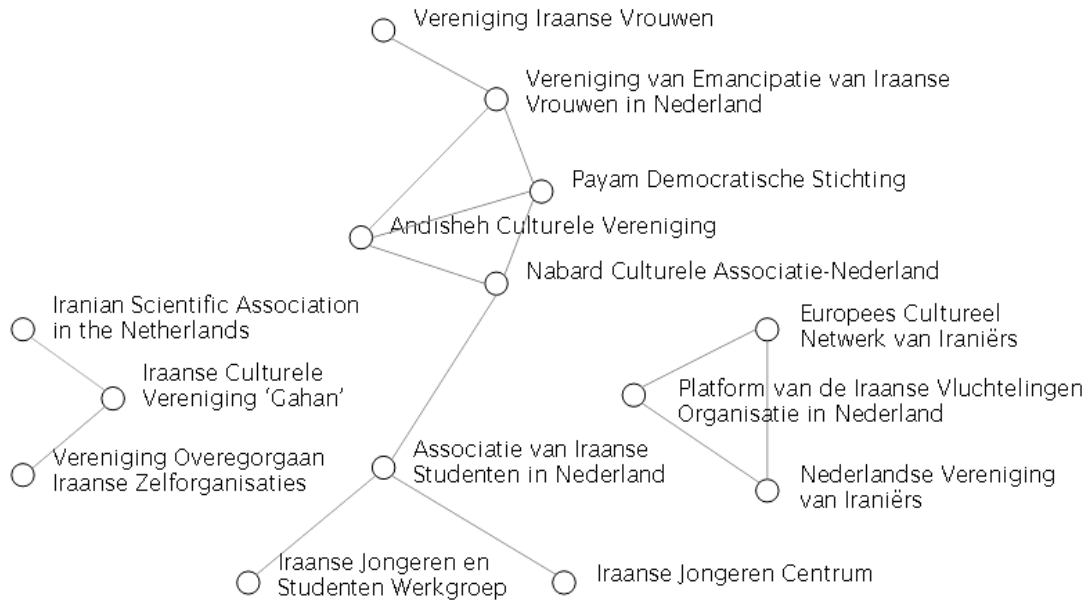
Internal network structure is less unequivocal. Network density and centralization are complementary measures of compactness (Scott 2000: 92), which indicate tie volume and distribution. Network density refers to the number of ties as a proportion of possible ties; network centralization concerns centrality variance or the extent to which a network revolves around one or a few nodes. However, a crucial aspect of node distribution remains invisible in this centralization measure: the percentage of isolated nodes, or fragmentation. We focus on fragmentation rather than centralization. Firstly, because it is more intuitive as an indicator of cohesion; a decentralized, unfragmented network appears to be more cohesive than a centralized, fragmented network. Secondly, the focus on fragmentation allows for the comparison with other ethnic communities for which percentages of isolated organizations are available.

As a consequence of both board member interlock lines (see Figure 1) and contacts between organizations, Dutch-Iranian network density is high (0.005 for interlocking board members and 0.002 for contacts)² in comparison with interlocking board member densities of Turks and Moroccans (0.001 en 0.001). In spite of a much lower absolute number of

² Board member data represent undirected ties (see table 1); contact data are directional: $5/(55 \times 54) [1/(n(n-1))]$.

tie lines (14 compared to 441 and 189), Dutch-Iranian organizations are mutually better connected than Dutch-Turkish or Dutch-Moroccan organizations.

Figure 1. Components in the Dutch-Iranian organization network of interlocking board members



However, high network density is not very significant as a measure for compactness when one ignores the way in which the organizations are distributed. The strong group/weak grid quadrant of enclaves in Mary Douglas's cultural organization typology, for instance, describes dense and decentralized networks characterized by factionalism (2003 (1982): 4; cf. Diani 2000: 15; 2003). In the case of Dutch-Iranian networks, a very high percentage of organizations turn out to be isolated (81%) compared with networks of Turks and Moroccans in the Netherlands (48% and 65%) (see Table 2). In other words, the high network density of the Dutch-Iranian organizations characterizes only a small number of organizations, which are mutually connected well above the average. High fragmentation renders the network's compactness low.

NETWORKS OF IRANIAN ORGANIZATIONS

Table 2. Fragmentation

	Turks (1999)	Moroccans (2001)	Iranians (2006)
organizations	773 ¹⁾	503 ¹⁾	74
isolates	374	325	60 ²⁾
fragmentation	48%	65%	81%

1) Van Heelsum (1999: 22; 2001: 22) identified isolates on the basis of organizations with sufficient board member information available, as opposed to total numbers of identified organizations (listed in table 1); 2) Iranian isolates emerge from deducing the fourteen connected Iranian organizations (see figure 1) from the sum total.

In sum, the organization degree of Dutch-Iranian organizations is low, which reflects low measures of organization density and compactness relative to Dutch-Turkish and Dutch-Moroccan networks.

Cultural migration

Redirecting the focus from individuals and households to networks, Tilly established that “networks migrate” (1990: 84), which to a large extent equally applies to Iranian migration to the Netherlands (cf. Koser 1997). The Iranian case may also be taken as indicative of how Tilly’s aphorism applies beyond the realm of the social to include the cultural realm as well. Not only do particular social networks migrate, but network templates are transplanted too.

A long-term continuity of social, political, and cultural organization in Iran has been identified in the pervasiveness and predominance of small, transient, personalised, informal groupings, often associated with *dowrehs* or ‘circles’ (Miller 1969a: 163, 1969b: 346). Thus, in the late Pahlavi era, “[t]he exercise of power in Iran [was] played out primarily within networks of informal groups” (Bill 1973: 132), and under the Islamic Republic there equally exists “[...] in Iran a set of informal networks that are in important ways more influential than the formal policy-making structure” (Samii 2006: 64).

Weak formal organization is the flipside of this system (Bill 1973: 133). The insignificance of formal organization manifests itself, for instance, in weak class formation, which has its origins in the insecurity of private property and the state's monopoly of all independent power (Katouzian 1997: 55), i.e., patrimonialism. The factors that militate against formal organization also explain the frequent occurrence of individual social mobility (Katouzian 1997: 55), which had brought Lord Curzon to famously declare that "Persia is the most democratic country in the world" (Curzon 1966 [1892]: 444).

Given that formal position is relatively unimportant, social mobility has been facilitated by informal networks. In the late Pahlavi era, the king stood at the apex of a network of personal webs that served elite recruitment (Bill 1973: 134; cf. Zonis 1971: 23-5; 83). In the Islamic Republic, radical clerics employed networks of upwardly mobile lower-middle and lower-class militant youth and compensated them with "access to the privileges and benefits controlled by leading clerics" (Bakhash in Denoeux 1993: 129).

Small informal networks and high potential social mobility are enduring features of the Iranian polity, which is equally characterised by (neo-)patrimonial rule (cf. Jahanbakhsh 2003: 245). Although the circumstances of post-1980s Dutch post-migration are very different - that is, (neo-)patrimonialism may be ruled out as an explanation - at first sight some of its associated features seem to be mirrored in the organization and integration of Dutch-Iranians.

As indicated above, the organization degree of Dutch-Iranian organizations is low relative to Dutch-Turkish and Dutch-Moroccan networks, while the social integration of Dutch-Iranians is exceptionally high. We have no evidence that informal networks as opposed to formal organizations have facilitated the social integration of Iranians, but we do have indications that organization scarcity and a strong orientation to Dutch society are rooted in the transplantation of aspects of Iranian political culture in a migration context.

NETWORKS OF IRANIAN ORGANIZATIONS

Translating (neo-)patrimonialism to individuals' perspectives, insecurity and distrust have been primary factors motivating informal networks and discouraging formal organization (cf. Fukuyama 2001). Distrust and doubt now also feature prominently in accounts of Iranians' diaspora organization in democratic settings (e.g. Chaichian 1997: 614; Khalili 1998). The two phenomena are related, as "exile groupings are, after all, in part the products of the Pahlavi era and suffer the same deformities of political culture: severe mistrust [...], an intense egoistic jostling for leadership, and an individualism which constantly prevents any coalition of forces from lasting very long" (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1987: 126).

The post-migration setting, however, offers an additional stimulus to not engage in formal organization and simultaneously, an incentive towards achieving social integration. Sanadjian cites the reluctance of British-Iranian migrants to join other Iranians because this would fix them in a subordinate group, or one group amongst others, which would betray their dream of class mobility (2000: 150). "The frustrated class mobility in exile [had] brought about an intensified competition [...] In asserting their 'middle-class' identity in diaspora it [had been] against fellow Iranians that [they] primarily directed their competitiveness" (p.151)".

In Iran, as well as in the Dutch-Iranian diaspora, insecurity and distrust relate to organizational features on the one hand and vertical mobility on the other. In the Iranian case, (neo-)patrimonialism breeds both distrust and insecurity, and explains both informality and mobility. In the Dutch-Iranian case, distrust and insecurity become autonomous motivations - unhinged from (neo-)patrimonialism - thus explaining low formal organization. These processes are reinforced by the apparent domination of first-generation Dutch-Iranians even in online Dutch-Iranian forums (cf. van den Bos and Nell 2006: 213). There are additional circumstances in the post-migration context that subvert formal organization and explain mobility. The sudden perception of ethnic disadvantage militates against ethnic organization

and pushes Dutch-Iranians toward integration into Dutch society – which provides a receptive opportunity structure. This is a scenario for cultural migration that would explain the Dutch-Iranian predicament.

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NETWORKS OF IRANIAN ORGANIZATIONS

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