Teen Life in Iran
Interview with Professor Ali Akbar Mahdi

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Q: Would you please tell us about your recent book Teen Life in the Middle East? Does it cover Iran as well? What do you think of Iranian teens in general?

A: This book offers insight into the typical day, interests, and familial, social and cultural lives of Middle Eastern teens. It covers 12 countries: Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Palestinian territories, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. The book provides readers in the West with a window into the everyday lives of teenagers in the Middle East, fostering a better understanding of both their similarities and differences.

The book demonstrates that the current population of the Middle East is young, and that their future is critical. Teen life in the Middle East is marked by extremes. In some countries, especially those that are westernized, teens share the benefits of globalization with material and social comforts such as private schooling and vacations abroad. In other countries, political instability, religious and cultural repression, war and occupation, earthquakes, and poverty are ongoing crises. Many teenagers must endure a difficult, and sometimes nearly impossible, path to adulthood.

The chapter on Iranian teens was written by Ms. Maghazei because she lives in Iran and I needed each chapter of the book to be written by someone whose knowledge of teen life is current, real, and in place. I write about Iran from sociological perspective but writing about what kind of music teens listen, what fashions and designs are attractive to them, you need a person who lives with them and interacts with them closely.

Iranian teens are vibrant, anxious, and often confused by cultural and social directions imposed on them. They live in a society with a strong identity and historical character, yet they are often tempted by the contemporary Western culture. They are told to do one thing by their parents, another by their political leaders, and yet another by the broader global culture. These conflicting and confusing messages are complicated by heavy restrictions imposed on their behavior in their current environment. Despite these contradictions, a dynamic future awaits Iranian youth. Hope this is enough for such a broad question.

Q: Tell us more about your recent prize.

A: As for this prize, it was a surprise to me. I came home and saw the e-mail. I had known the Middle East Outreach Council but did not know that it evaluates books and gives annual awards. Each year the Outreach selects several books in different categories as the best book for the year. This year, my book was included as one of the best reference book for the youth in the Middle East for 2004.

Q: There are people in Iran who believe that the most serious challenge facing Iranian youth is identity crisis. What

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Ali Akbar Mahdi is Professor of Sociology at Ohio Wesleyan University. He has served as the President of Michigan Sociological Association (1987-1988), the editor of the Michigan Sociological Review (1989-1994), and the Executive Director of the Center for Iranian Research and Analysis (1993-95). He is the author of four books: Teen Life in the Middle East (Greenwood Press, 2003), Iranian Culture, Civil Society, and Concern for Democracy (1989), Sociology in Iran (1994), and Sociology of the Iranian Family (1975), five monographs (including Women and Law in Iran, and Resources for Teaching Sociology of Development and Women in International Development), and over 100 articles and reviews (in both Persian and English) in various scholarly journals and popular magazines. He was recently awarded the Middle East Book Award for his book Teen Life in the Middle East.
do you think?

A: There are a couple of points that I would like to clarify. One’s identity is those characteristics that set us apart from others. Do Iranian teens have a problem with who they are, as Iranian? I do not think so. From this perspective, Iranian youth has no identity problem. But, there are pressures in our society to tell these teens that they need to see their “Iranianess” in a certain way, define it according to specific religious or cultural interpretation. Furthermore, their “historically Iranian behaviors” are challenged by the new dominant religious ideology. While at home, they are taught to be “Iranian first, Muslim next” and once outside they are thought to be a “Muslim first, Iranian next.” This is a source of contradiction and identity problem.

The issues I wrote about earlier are all identity problems. If someone teaches you to do A and then the next person wants you to do B, then you are confused as to what you are expected to do. If you want to be a free individual, capable of exercising your rights, but are confronted by a society, which limits those freedoms and rights, you are confused and conflicted as who you should be: yourself or someone who adjust to outside pressure. To be yourself, you risk difficulties because it is against those pressures and restrictions imposed on you. To be what your society wants you to be, then you are alienated from your true self. Either way, you are alienated and confronted by the issues of identity.

Q: How is the situation of second generation of Iranian teens living outside Iran?

A: Second generation of Iranians in the United States should be distinguished from those in other Western countries since each country, as well as Iranians in that country, has its own dynamics. For instance, I have been studying Iranians in the United States since 1995 and can say that they are quite different than what I read about Iranians in Canada or Sweden. In most cases there are more differences than similarities. So, we should not make generalizations.

As for Iranian second generation in the US, they are found to be generally proud of their ancestral background, speak Persian with accent, do not know Iranian history very well, and have a confusing picture of Iranian culture. The latter is the result of several factors: Their distance from and lack of first hand knowledge of Iran, conflicting news they hear about their parental homeland in the United States, the diverse cultural patterns they observe among Iranians in the US, and the general lack of interaction among Iranian youth, especially where there is no concentration of Iranians. The only city in the US where there is a physical concentration of Iranians is Los Angeles. In most other areas, even where there is a large group of Iranians, like New York or Texas, all Iranians live in dispersed residential areas and do not have regular day-to-day contact with each other, especially the youth.

Those Iranian second generations whose parents are both Iranians, as well as those teens who were born in Iran and migrated to the US early in their childhood, are more prone to call themselves “Iranian-Americans.” Those with one parent from Iran are more likely to call themselves “American.”

Overall, these Iranian Americans are very successful in school and most are on the top of their classes. They have not had much problem in assimilating. A few complain of “discrimination,” but they are capable of handling these cases without strong impact on their psychological profile. Their major complaint is about contradictions they confront in mixing Iranian and American cultural patterns. At home, they are forced to live like Iranians while outside they have to live like Americans. Coping with this conflict is not easy for all. Still, they come out of mostly successful. Another complaint is the “ta’aarofhae Irani” which is bothersome to them. They find it hypocritical, time-consuming, cumbersome, and often dishonest. A related third complaint we hear is “duality” seen in Iranian behavior (being one kind of person at home and another outside, being nice in front of the guests, then turning against them as soon as they leave). These contradictory behaviors, very common in Iranian culture, are awfully baffling to Iranian-American youth.

Q: And as my final question, how do you evaluate the present situation of sociology in Iran?

A: There was a period after the revolution that the sociology community was in disarray. In the second decade of the revolution, Iranian sociologists began to build up their departments and regain their strength again. The development of the Iranian Sociological Association is a symbol of this revitalization. There are very interesting developments in this discipline in Iran, especially in the areas of field and survey research. Theory continues to remain a weak spot in current Iranian sociology. Most theoretical works published are either translation or synthetic work without much creativity to be presented at the international level. Those whose works have broader appeal often publish their works in sociological journals abroad. Of course there are some exceptions but we are talking about the general trend here and not exceptions.