



Aryeh Levin

**The Jews of Iran:
The Fragile Subsistence of
an Ancient Community**

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Cover and pages 9, 10, 11: Hamed Saber; page 14: Prof. Joel Kotek; page 15:
Jewish Agency for Israel

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Printed in Israel

Design and production: Shmuel Tal Printing Services, Ltd., Jerusalem

Summary

At the end of December 2007, some forty Iranian Jews made *aliyah* to Israel. This event received broad media coverage, which, hopefully, has not jeopardized the benign stance of the Iranian government regarding restrictions on Jews leaving Iran. The arrival of these new immigrants has refocused attention on the lot of Iranian Jews living under the Shia revolutionary government.

The Jewish presence in Iran dates back twenty-seven hundred years. The Islamic theocracy has now been in power in Iran for close to three decades. During that time, the Jewish community has undergone significant changes. Of the eighty thousand Jews that lived there on the eve of the Revolution, today some twenty-five thousand remain and the community is aging. The hallmark of post-Revolutionary Jewish life has been the community's absolute fealty to the state. Given the Iranian government's vitriolic stance toward Israel and Zionism, Iranian Jews have been forced to practice a difficult balancing act: They are able to practice Judaism unperturbed so long as they put aside any sense of connection to the Jewish state. However, the existing ambience in the country cannot but affect the long-term viability of the Jewish community. Antisemitism is not officially sanctioned by the government but ever present is the fear that the widespread hostility toward Israel will translate into acts of violence against Jewish individuals or institutions. Moreover, the government's official policy of promoting Holocaust denial cannot but be interpreted, even by its foreign apologists, as antisemitic.

Today, Jewish life is mainly concentrated in Tehran. The provincial communities are in an irreversible state of decline. Moreover, there is real concern about intermarriage because of the paucity of Jews of marriageable age. At least from a material point of view most Jews lead a comfortable life, earning their living in traditional, if small-scale, commerce, though the state sector of the economy is virtually closed to them. Most young Jews do not see a promising future for themselves in Iran.

The Author

Aryeh Levin served as Israel's minister plenipotentiary to Iran from 1973-1977 and Israel's first ambassador to the USSR after the resumption of relations in 1991. He headed the Political Research Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1985-1988, and from 1981-1985 he served as Israel's deputy permanent representative to the United Nations. Aryeh Levin is the author of *Envoy to Moscow*.

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The Jews of Iran: The Fragile Subsistence of an Ancient Community

History

The Jewish people were forcibly transferred from the Kingdom of Israel, then from the Kingdom of Judah to Mesopotamia and to what is now Iran, from the seventh century BCE onwards. They settled in Iran over a thousand years before the Muslim Arab invasion toppled and destroyed the indigenous Zoroastrian monotheistic culture. Subsequently, they were urged to return to Zion by the Persian King Cyrus the Great, who founded the Persian Empire in 550 BCE. The resurgence of Jewish sovereignty in 1948 brought to culmination Cyrus' command in 532 BCE: "The God of Heaven... has charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem.... Whoever is among you of all his people... let him go... and rebuild the house of...the God of Israel" (Ezra 1:2-3). Today, Iran's fundamentalist president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, seemingly oblivious to (or derisive of) his own country's glorious past, negates that ancient exhortation, rants against the State of Israel and vows its total destruction "in a great storm." This wish, with its antisemitic overtones, exposes the Jewish presence in Iran, after twenty-seven hundred years, to the greatest dangers it has ever faced.

The Jews of Iran did, indeed, experience the throes of adversity, just as they savored bursts of prosperity, many times over during their long sojourn in Persia. Their numbers dwindled and surged as the many invading armies and empires—from the Greeks and the Sassanians to the Arabs, Seljuks, Mongols and Afghans—occupied and abandoned these lands. To that litany we must add the tempestuous narrative of the native Iranian kingdoms: the Saffavids, who imposed the Shia doctrine and foisted their religion on many Jews, to Nadir Shah, the Iranian conqueror of India, who entrusted the Jews with the safekeeping of his treasures.

Successive dynasties generally repressed and often persecuted Iranian Jews, relegating them to ghettos. It was only with the advent of the Pahlavi dynasty in the late 1920s that Jews were allowed to regain a measure of equality. After World War II, the Jewish community flourished. Its capable and energetic leaders helped bring Iran into the fold of modern-day commerce and industry. Iranian Jews became the wealthiest Jews per capita in the world. However, their rapid ascent toward the pinnacles of the economy never won them total recognition as full-fledged members of Iranian society, nor did it open the gates toward their participation in political life. The Shah was wary of Shia prejudice.

The Iranian Revolution of the late 1970s brought a sea-change. In the aftershock of his revolutionary success, Ayatollah Khomeini sent a number of prominent local Jews to the firing

squad to demonstrate the Revolution's loyalties to the Islamic world and to distance himself from Western powers, especially America. The punishment meted out to the heads of the Jewish community prompted a number of distinguished Iranian Muslims to approach Khomeini and ask him to relent, in view of the long record of Jewish presence and of their complete loyalty to Iran. "Imam" Khomeini acceded and reaffirmed the Islamic recognition of the Jews as the People of the Book, that is, provided that those in his country disassociated themselves from the "Zionists." They were to be tolerated, perhaps even respected. Khomeini's heirs followed his injunction.

The last two decades have corroborated Khomeini's disposition toward Jews and other religious minorities (except the Bahá'ís, considered apostates to the Shia doctrine). However, there is a finer distinction made with regard to the Jews. Whereas the Christians—Armenians and others—and the Zoroastrians have no declared or identifiable loyalties toward an outside power, the Jews have to demonstrably distance themselves from Israel or any "Zionist" associations. Wizedened by their long experience, the Jews internalized the Islamic Republic's dictum. They generate an aura of "Mosaic" identity, but are faithfully, and demonstrably, obedient to the law of the land. This has become the hallmark of Jewish life in Iran after the Islamic Revolution.

Adjusting to New Realities

The Islamic theocracy has now been in power in Iran for the last twenty-nine years. The beginning of this period was difficult and confusing. As the situation stabilized, a basic framework of life emerged under the new regime. The following are some of the salient features of the present reality of Iranian Jewish life.

First and foremost are the demographic numbers, which are a telling feature of Jewish life anywhere in the Diaspora over the ages. In evaluating the relationship between the Iranian majority and the Jewish minority, one must consider the fact that at the end of the 1950s and until the late 1970s there were some eighty to ninety thousand Jews living in Iran. At that time, the Iranians numbered some twenty to twenty-five million. The Jews then constituted roughly 0.004 percent of the total population. Today's twenty-five thousand Jews represent 0.00036 percent of the country's current population of seventy million.

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In 1948, the Zionist call resounded strongly in the largely impoverished Iranian countryside, in the many towns and villages inhabited by the Jews over the centuries. More than thirty-five thousand Jews immigrated to Israel between 1948–1970. Another factor in the swelling numbers of Iranian immigrants was the fact that Iranian Jewish leaders preferred to encourage the weak, sick and poverty-stricken members of their community to go to Israel, rather than invest in them at home.

However, Iranian immigrants did not fare too well in Israel in their first years: The country was young and its difficulties many. The treatment of Iranian Jews in the throes of their absorption was similar to that of the multitude of other immigrants who flooded the Israeli cities and countryside and its periphery. Iranian Jews were, for the most part, settled by the government on the newly established frontiers, exposed as they then were to Arab marauders and infiltrators. They were often in danger and were called upon to defend the new borders of the country and to labor in agriculture. These circumstances were very different from the conditions to which they had been accustomed for centuries. To be sure, these new burdens were not necessarily welcome changes. Nevertheless, Iranian Jews proved resilient. They bore their lot with patience, learned to survive and even succeed as they had always done in the past, in the old country.

But, over a longer period of time, some Iranian Jews found it difficult to acculturate in Israel. The mores of the masses in the great melting pot that was Israel after its independence were a tough challenge for a people used to an age-old symbiosis with the small-town, non-Jewish population. Eventually, the Iranian immigration into Israel thinned. A trickle of Jews returned to Iran. The prosperity and growing tolerance toward the Jews under the Shah during the 1960s and '70s encouraged most to stay in Iran. It was possible to share in the country's affluence.

The events that immediately preceded the Revolution were a wakeup call heeded by many. The pace of emigration and the relocation of wealth and capital quickened. The apprehension felt by many Jews during the early stages of Islamic rule encouraged them to settle abroad, even if illegally and at great risk. Israel and the Jewish organizations were aware of the Iranian Jews' anxiety and assisted as much as they could in their flight to the United States (particularly southern California), Europe and Israel—and there are now a number of thriving Iranian Jewish communities in those places.

The Revolution and its aftermath brought about a sharp reduction in the Jewish population. Emigration from Iran after the Revolution slowed down only because of the severe limitations laid down by the government. After a number of years, as a result of greater difficulties in leaving Iran, on the one hand, and the lasting nature of the reign of the mullahs, on the other, movement out of the country was put on hold, even though the desire to leave continued to percolate.

It is often stated that present-day Iran has the second-largest Jewish community in the Middle East. This merely points to the fact that hundreds of thousands of Jews who inhabited this region before 1948 left their homes mainly, but not exclusively, for Israel.

Today's small community is now valiantly maintaining its communal life: a functioning communal structure, religious rites and education, a voice in parliament, all at the price of political self-effacement and identification with the government's external and internal policies. The continuity of the Islamic regime and the comfortable economic position of the community

have made it possible for the Jews to merge into the background and live by the rules laid down by the theocratic administration.

In the 1960s and '70s, the Jewish population began to converge on Tehran to take advantage of the economic opportunities in the capital. This trend was accelerated after the Revolution, when the decrease in the Jewish population made it imperative for the remaining Jews to concentrate in Tehran, where they felt they had greater safeguards and access to Jewish education and religious services. To be sure, the desire for social cohesion was an important factor in this trend as well.

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Community organizations

The Anjoman is the umbrella organization which oversees the various activities of the community and protects its interests. Its leaders are elected by the community every four years. Haroun Yeshayayi, an active and well-connected leader (even if formerly a Communist), is currently head of the organization. There is also a very active women's organization, the Anjomane Banuan, which deals with many of the social problems facing the community.

The Anjoman publishes a quarterly journal—the *Bina* [meaning clear-sighted in Farsi]—which reports on the events in the life of the community. It also publishes articles and commentaries pertaining to Judaism and its history. It is interesting to note that this journal has been publishing material on the Holocaust, including recent developments in research on the subject. This raises the awareness of the Jews, and perhaps others, especially in light of the vitriolic Holocaust denial emanating from the country's head of state.

The Iranian Constitution of 1906 allowed the Jews a single representative (the Zoroastrians and Christians have their own) in the Majles, the Iranian Parliament. The Muslim constitution has respected this provision. The Jewish Member of Parliament, Morris Motamed, is well regarded and active in the defense of his electors' rights and interests.

The Jewish Sapir Hospital, in the former ghetto area, was founded by an outstanding Jewish physician, Dr. Sapir, some sixty years ago, and is still functioning. It was greatly helped and ultimately reorganized by the American Joint Jewish Distribution Committee and various Jewish international organizations in the pre-Revolutionary period and provided a haven for the many poor in the community. Since the Islamic Revolution, the Sapir hospital has been treating mainly Muslim patients due to the decrease in numbers of the Jewish population. In keeping with the post-Revolution ambience in Iran, during the Lebanese Civil War the Jewish hospital announced its willingness to treat wounded Hizbullah insurgents. More recently, it tended to Arabs who suffered injuries during the Second Lebanon War, including Hamas fighters and other Palestinians “wounded by the Israel armed forces.”

The hospital is financed by the Iranian Jewish community and receives a limited amount of help from the Iranian government. The Sapir Hospital is recognized by the authorities for its valuable help in treating residents from the poorer section of Tehran. Contributions are made to the hospital by various government organizations, as well (President Ahmadinejad's office recently donated €23,800, the Parliament €33,500; the UK Jewish community sent in €28,000 and the Iranian Jewish organizations and private individuals €75,000).



Torah scroll in an Iсфаهان synagogue

The synagogues and cemeteries are perhaps the surest indicators of the state of the community. In the provinces, and even in the larger cities so well known in Iranian Jewish lore, such as Iсфаهان, Kashan, Shiraz, Sanandaj, Yazd and others, the community has been compelled to close down synagogues, some dating back centuries. The cemeteries are either full or closed. For the time being, most of the buildings, and the Torah scrolls that have not been moved to Tehran, are still in the care of custodians. These synagogues were originally built on the edge of the towns, on lots which have now become central and attractive to developers. The endeavor to save Jewish community and personal property had already begun under the Shah, when Jewish personalities still carried weight with the authorities. Now, community leaders are fighting what might be a losing battle over the future of their material heritage.

While many areas historically connected with the Jews have now become vulnerable to the gradual takeover by the adjacent inhabitants and the local administrations, it is perhaps the Gilliard cemetery which stands out as the most vivid example of the vicissitudes of the Jewish story in Iran.

Tradition has it that not all of the Jews living in Mesopotamia and Persia followed Cyrus' order and Nehemia's call to return to Jerusalem. Many stayed behind to partake of the good life. Some resided in a town called Gilliard, in the shadow of the great Mount Demavend (north of today's Tehran). Sixty or seventy years ago a small Jewish community still lived there, but soon abandoned the town. The local cemetery survived. Wealthy Jews preferred to secure burial plots in the Gilliard cemetery, where some of the headstones date back many centuries. Today, the adjoining houses are encroaching on the cemetery, which is directly threatened. The final demolition of Gilliard will sever an ancient tradition. This act of destruction is a metaphor for the diminishing Jewish connection with Iran.

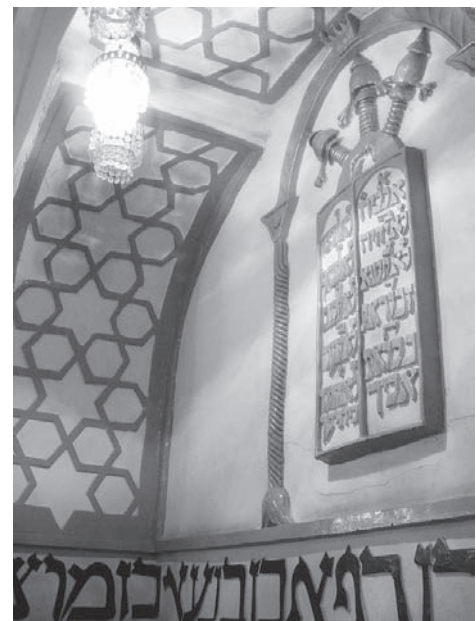
As for the synagogues, as their number decreased, their attendance grew. Friday evening and Saturday morning prayers attract many worshippers, some of whom also attend daily services. Synagogue attendance is bolstered, in part, by the fact that Jews seek a greater sense of self-assurance and togetherness, as well as social interaction. The regime looks approvingly upon religious activity. In fact, Jewish houses of prayer have become centerpieces for official

propaganda, demonstrating Muslim tolerance. At times, even Shia officials visit the synagogues in Tehran, where they receive an explanation of the services, demonstrate their support, and get photographed. In 2003, President Khatami himself visited the Youssefabad synagogue in central Tehran and pledged continuous interest and encouragement. Visits by university students, Muslim clerics and international travellers have also taken place.

At present, there are four large, active synagogues in Tehran, serving a population of fourteen thousand. The six to seven thousand Jews in Shiraz and the two thousand in Isfahan and the smaller towns each have synagogues of their own. This is a far cry from the nearly one hundred synagogues in existence before the Revolution. The smaller synagogues, in Yazd, for instance, often cannot muster a *minyán* [the quorum of adult males required to hold organized prayers].

The community enjoys the continued services of some of its religious leaders, mostly in the larger cities. The chief rabbi of Iranian Jewry is Yousef Hamedani Cohen. The rabbinical authorities have built up a good relationship with the Muslim religious and civil authorities. From time to time, they are received by the Muslim clergy and political leaders, including past presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami, who expressed an interest in the life of the community and promised help and protection.

The Iranian government contributes limited budgetary support to the synagogues (and other non-Muslim religious establishments). Houses of worship are supported by the *Awghaf*—the religious establishment’s property trust. Synagogues are protected sites. Recently, during the Second Lebanon War, a Tehran newspaper published pictures showing the congregation of a synagogue, purported to be in Iran, waving Israeli flags in support of Israel. Two synagogues in Shiraz were attacked by a mob, but the permanent guards posted by the government prevented any vandalism, and explained that the pictures represented synagogues in Israel.¹



*The Tombs of Esther and Mordechai
in Hamadan*

The functioning synagogues are mostly in good repair. Some have been declared national Iranian heritage sites, such as the ancient synagogue in Yazd, which would otherwise lack a sustainable community to provide for its future. A number of ancient Jewish monuments relating to the tradition of ancient Jewish

¹ This incident brings to mind a similar occurrence during the Asian Games organized by the Shah’s government in 1976. An Iranian and an Israeli football team played at the central stadium. Tension began mounting visibly in Tehran as the Israeli team appeared to be gaining the upper hand. A mob began forming at the gates of the ghetto to wreak vengeance upon the Jews, whose team might “dare” win over the Iranian (Shia) side. It was only due to the Israeli loss (by a self-goal) that a pogrom was prevented—and that event took place in the days of the Shah.

prophets and holy people are respected by Muslims, as well, and attract pilgrims. These shrines are cared for by the Jewish community, often with the help of the local municipalities.



Daniel's Tomb in Susa (Shush)

The tomb of the prophet Daniel in Susa (the biblical Shush in the west of Iran) is especially notable in this respect, because of the Shia belief that Daniel predicted the advent of Ali, the fourth caliph after Muhammad and the originator of the Shia sect in Islam. Other Jewish monuments exist as well: the tombs of Queen Esther and Mordechai in Hamadan, the prophet Habakkuk near Hamadan and others.

The Jewish school system also declined in the years following the Revolution. The Alliance Israelite Universelle schools were opened in Iran in the late nineteenth century, as a result

of European intervention at the Royal Court following pogroms in 1830 and 1866. Before that time, there was no system of Jewish education operating in Iran. The Alliance opened its doors to Muslims, as well, and a few notable personalities began their education within its walls, including General Razmara, the army chief of staff and later prime minister, who was assassinated in 1951 by Muslim zealots. The community established additional primary and secondary schools in Tehran and the provinces. In 1958, the Alliance operated some thirty-four schools in Iran. All have now closed down or function under different names.

The rabbinical authorities have built up a good relationship with the Muslim religious and civil authorities

After World War II, the Orthodox Otsar Hatorah lower schools started operating in many cities. The revolutionary government decreed that the Otsar Hatorah schools, supported by foreign Jewish organizations, were spreading propaganda against Islam.

The schools were promptly closed, or given names more acceptable to Shia revolutionary ears. Their ties to the outside world were cut off. The functioning of these institutions became more dependent upon community financial assistance and, to a certain degree, government aid. Some of the kindergartens and schools receive financial support from abroad, usually the UK. This aid is permitted but obviously cannot go beyond certain modest limits.

The decrease in the Jewish population has severely curtailed the activity of its schools, now operating mainly in Tehran. The schools follow the government curriculum required for secondary school diplomas and have obligatory studies in the Jewish tradition. Jewish studies, Pentateuch and Prophets, biblical stories and traditions are taught in Farsi. Hebrew classes are voluntary and are taught after school hours by private teachers. Some students have drifted into Muslim schools, where there have been complaints of antisemitic incidents. On one occasion, a

teacher told her class that the Jewish girl who went out in the rain had become “unclean” and was best to be avoided.² Students studying outside the Jewish schools are exposed to aggressive Muslim missionary activity.

As a result of the changes wrought by the Revolution, the Jewish schools have had to accept the appointment of Muslim principals and administrators by the government. Boys and girls are prohibited from attending class together. Sabbath cannot be observed, as that would “impinge on equality”—Jewish schools having two days of rest as opposed to only one (Friday) for the Muslim children. Schools are subject to official propaganda. The Jewish children are inculcated with Iran’s view of the outside world, including “illegal Israel,” Zionism and Palestine, Iran’s right to nuclear energy and other similar subjects.

Among the many extra-curricular activities the Jewish community organizes for its children and youth are the study of Hebrew and Jewish history and the maintenance of a library. Sports are popular in Jewish schools. Teams are organized in football and other games, and inter-city competitions are held between Jewish schools. Synagogues and schools also organize summer camps, which are well attended, and outings to the countryside. Contact with non-Jewish schools, however, is rare. Jewish children and youth keep very much to themselves.

The economic and political circumstances of this small community are evidently the key to its continued survival. An objective appraisal shows that at the present time, there is no cause for fear regarding the continuation of the Jewish minority in an Iran run by its theocratic Shia regime. The future, however, seems less certain.

The Iranian government proclaims—and practices—an evenhanded approach to the Jewish community. An effort is made to appear supportive of the Jewish people in Iran as members of a traditional Iranian minority, so long as they do not maintain contact in any way with “Zionist Israel.” The community pays the price of its tolerable relationship with the government by maintaining its respectful and disciplined stance, and by its repeated condemnations of Israel and its policies. The Jewish community takes every opportunity to support the president and other officials in their declarations on international and regional policies. President Ahmadinejad’s pronouncements on successes in the enrichment of uranium are applauded as the affirmation of Iran’s right to scientific progress. No effort is spared to reaffirm the Iranian Jews’ identification with Iran and its current rulers.

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² This and similar incidents reflect the Shia dogma of considering any non-Muslim “unclean” and endangering Muslims by contamination. It must be said, however, that this type of behavior has become rarer than in the recent past, when Shia animosity toward the “other” was more widespread.

Despite the strict surveillance of Jewish compliance with official government policies, the Jewish MP and the head of the Anjoman openly protested Ahmadinejad's denial of the Holocaust. They expressed regret at the oft-repeated declarations, as well as at the anti-Holocaust caricature competition and other similar initiatives. The community published—and continues to publish—historical material on the Holocaust. This endeavor was tolerated by the officialdom and was, in fact, supported by well-known personalities, such as the former president, Khatami.

Today, the post-Revolution Jewish community cannot boast of great names in commerce, the free professions, science or other fields. The Jews have comfortable incomes; they earn their livings by engaging in traditional small-time commerce, maintaining their shops and other similar activities in the heart of the cities. Their relationship with their Muslim neighbors in business is polite, often friendly.

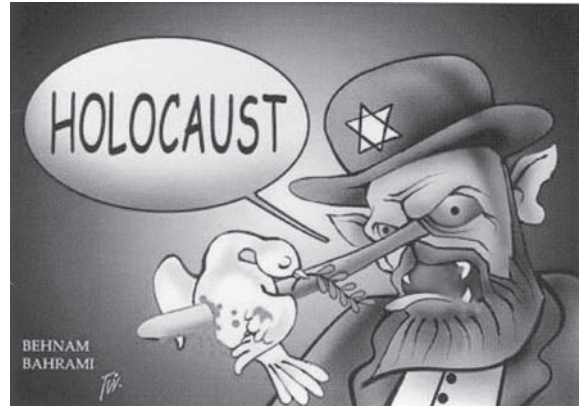
Jews in Iran as great industrialists, world-class merchants and land developers are a thing of the past. Today's Iranian Jews tend to maintain their properties, houses and stores as investments, since land and property values are constantly on the rise and inflation rampant. This situation is true of the older generation; however, the young cannot see a promising future for themselves. Young men are conscripted into the army, though wherever possible, Jewish families attempt to avoid this because of the existing anti-Jewish attitudes and the nature of the service itself. Both girls and boys have great difficulty finding suitable marriage partners due to the constantly dwindling numbers in the Jewish population. Parents are greatly concerned about the dangers of intermarriage into Muslim families, in which case their children are considered lost both to their parents and the community. Maturing Jewish girls are coveted by Muslim suitors, who are turned away with difficulty. All of this paints a picture of a community advancing in age, with uncertain prospects for the future.

Jewish youth who do not seek to go abroad (to the US, Europe or Israel) often join their parents' businesses, even if they have been educated to work in a free profession. Indeed, there are Jewish students at the University of Tehran, but their possibilities for employment after graduation are limited and their chances of advancement next to nil. Joining their parents' business assures them of a steady income and the promise of available funds when, and if, they sell their businesses.

Iranian Jews are subjected to mandatory limitations on employment in the government, the armed forces and the judiciary. They do not enjoy the same housing benefits as do their Muslim neighbors. Those Jews who stayed in official positions in the hierarchy after the Revolution were eased out of responsible jobs. Today, most doors remain closed to the Jews, as well as to most other religious minorities. In the days of the Shah, there were many more exceptions and a tendency toward liberalization and integration of the Jews in the administration.

Antisemitism is not officially promoted by the authorities. In fact, it is strongly denied. And yet, the shrill campaign against Israel and "Zionism" is causing concern. In 2004, many Iranian

newspapers celebrated the one-hundredth anniversary of the publication of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* by widely publishing and distributing them in Iran. Jews are also often targets of demonizing caricatures in the Iranian press. The media, schools, administration and the general public are constantly exposed to the projection of this basically antisemitic propaganda. Religious leaders, in their Friday sermons and in their widely distributed publications, provide a permanent stream of anti-Israel indoctrination. The thin line separating anti-Zionist and anti-Israeli propaganda from outright antisemitism is growing ever thinner. There is no reason to doubt that this thin line will eventually vanish in the minds of the millions of Iranians subjected to fundamentalist and anti-Jewish brainwashing.



An example of a submission to the state-sponsored Holocaust caricature competition

One should not forget that over 50 percent of Iranians are now under the age of twenty-five and know almost nothing of the outer world. At school, in the mosques and at home, through television and radio, people are constantly inculcated with poisonous invocations against Israel—synonymous with the Jews in the minds of the majority of the population. Jews take great pains to disassociate themselves from “world Jewry” and Zionism. They do not, for example, participate in the activities of the World Jewish Congress. Sadly, this disassociation is not likely to prevent an eventual outbreak of active antisemitism.

The danger always exists that an Iranian mob, or even the government, may turn its attention to the Jews and engage in acts of violence, single or serial. The blind fury of such fanaticism will probably have nothing to do with the Iranian Jewish community but may yet translate into a pogrom. Iranian Jews remain at the mercy of their Shia governors. There is no defense against a mob if it is willingly tolerated or incited by someone in power. An obvious example of this is the entirely baseless accusations of spying leveled at thirteen Jews some years ago. These accusations have as yet to be explained; they now appear to have been fostered by inter-mullah rivalry. Jewish history in Iran is replete with such scenarios. In today’s Iran, a violent anti-Jewish outbreak could be triggered by an international crisis, another war in the Middle-East, sanctions against Iran or simply a feud between competing factions of the regime. Any number of combinations of these would produce the same result. In the prevailing climate in Iran, or under the influence of potentially worsening internal strife, Jews may once again find themselves at the mercy of circumstance, as they have always been in the past.

Iran is, and will remain, an isolated country, largely away from “prying Western eyes,” with no access to a strong authority or leader willing to “compromise” his own position to protect the Jews. The story of the killing, by Khomeini, of Habib Elghanayan, the former head of the Jewish community, is still fresh in many minds. At the time, most world leaders, eminent

religious personages and many others in vain pleaded with an intransigent Khomeini. Elghanayan—and a dozen or so other Jewish personalities—were executed.

Today, the regime wishes to project an image of fairness and Muslim tolerance toward members of the other faiths (provided they are sanctioned by Islam). However, there is no reliable defensive wall protecting the lives and the little property that the Iranian Jews still possess, and they can hardly have recourse to any patron outside the country.

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Airport reunion: Iranian immigrant arriving in Israel, December 2007

The Iranian Jewish community is fully aware of these dangers. It continues its existence in the belief and hope that somehow the storm might not gather greater momentum, and will pass. In fact, there have been few restrictions on Jews leaving Iran. At the end of December 2007, some forty Iranians made *aliyah* to Israel. It is hoped that others who desire to leave will be allowed to do so, despite the publicity that surrounded that event.

The nearly three thousand years of Jewish life in Iran have taught the community that ambitious and extremist leaders come and go, and that political and religious conditions can vary, but that patience and perseverance are virtues that can assure the continuation and an eventual reemergence of the Jewish community in better times.

Author's note:

The author would like to express his gratitude for the help generously provided in research on this article by Mr. Menashe Amir, the head of the Farsi language broadcast of Israeli Radio; Mr. Meir Javedanfar, Middle East analyst; and Mr. Nati Toubian of MEMRI TV [Middle East Media Research Institute TV Monitor Project].



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