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**Socio-Cultural Life of Iranian Jews in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

A historical and sociological study of Iran demonstrates that the Jews are one of the major components of the mosaic of Iranian Identity. However, despite millenia living in the Diaspora, the Jewish community in Iran still identifies strongly with its Jewish roots. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Iranian Jews had lost their pride and confidence as a community due to long-term humiliation, persecutions, pogroms, and forced conversions. While there were other marginalized groups in Iran, none of these minorities had the strength or ability to fight for their rights, individually or collectively. The earliest record of the Iranian Jewish community need for assistance is the communication between Dr. Jakob Edward Polak (1820-1891) the Austrian physician serving in the Royal Court of Iran in the mid 1880s and the Alliance Israelite committee in Paris regarding the poor condition of Iranian Jewry.<sup>1</sup>

The education provided through Alliance Israelite, joined with the Constitutional Revolution of Iran (1906-1909), brought a historical shift for Iranian Jews. The Iranian Constitution gave them and all the other minorities an opportunity to live under more humane conditions. Unfortunately, Iran, as a nation, was not yet ready for the changes that were required by the new Constitution. The Constitution and its Bill of Rights were never fully implemented. While Iran's House of Representatives, called the *Majles*, had one Jewish representative, he felt so alienated by his Muslim counterparts that he resigned his position in the first year. The

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<sup>1</sup> Habib Levy, *Comprehensive History of the Jews of Iran* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1999), pp. 452-453.

Muslim Clergyman, Seyyed Abdollah Behbahani, who represented Iranian Jews for the first two-year session of the *Majles*, replaced the Jewish representative.<sup>2</sup>

Although the constitutional government did not give the Jews or other religious minorities full rights of citizenship, Jews, along with other minorities, benefited from the intellectual, social and economical move toward enlightenment evidenced by their emancipation. The first indication of Jewish enlightenment was the publication of the Persian Jewish newspaper, *Shalom*, written in Judeo-Persian, published in 1915.<sup>3</sup>

With the rise of Zionism, after the Balfour Declaration in 1917, the Iranian Jews were faced with a dual allegiance to the land they were born in and their religious faith. Thus, the first step taken by the Iranian Jewish community in their belief in Zionism was to establish the “Association for the Strengthening of the Hebrew Language” in order to promote knowledge of Hebrew language. In addition, it could create Jewish awareness among the members of the community, which had become less common over the centuries in the Diaspora. The change in title from “Association for the Strengthening of the Jewish Language” to “The Iranian Zionist Organization” was intended to gain support from Jewry outside Iran and to create pride among the Iranian Jewish community in its Jewish heritage.<sup>4</sup>

Although some emigrants went to Israel because of their belief in Zionism, even after the Balfour Declaration and the San Remo Resolution, few Jews left Iran.<sup>5</sup> Zionism for most Jews of Iran was simply a source of pride rather an inspiration to emigrate. Twenty-seven centuries of

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<sup>2</sup> Levy, *Comprehensive History*, pp. 473, 491.

<sup>3</sup> Amnon Netzer, *Padyavand*, vol. 1 (Costa Mesaa: Mazda Publishers, 1966), p. 470.

<sup>4</sup> Levy, *Comprehensive History*, p. 513.

<sup>5</sup> *The Israel-Arab Reader*, edited, Walter Laqueur (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), pp. 34-42:

San Remo Conference was an international meeting of the post World War I Allied Supreme Council held in San Remo Italy from 19 to 26 April 1920. The conference’s decisions were only confirmed by the Council of the League of Nations on 24 July, 1922 and it came into operation when Turkey accepted the terms of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne.

common history, language and culture made Iran home to its Jewish community. Even though Jews were deprived of high executive, judicial and legislative office, Iranian Jews were loyal, willing subjects of the monarchy in Iran and strove for the betterment of their livelihood there.

Some of the early Zionist publications in Iran were the Persian translation of Hertzels Pamphlet, "The Jewish State" (*Judenstaat*) in 1919, and the establishment of an official publication named *Ha-Geulah*, meaning "Redemption," a weekly newspaper in Judeo-Persian from December 1920 to June 1923.<sup>6</sup> In the fall of 1921, the Iranian Jewish Women's Zionist Association was organized in Tehran and later on in Hamedan. The branch in Tehran, however was monitored and advised by one of the Men's Board Members. By 1922 the Association had eighteen branches in various cities and drafted a new charter in order to unify its newer branches.<sup>7</sup>

The rise of Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1978) led to a prohibition of all organized political parties or any activity connected to a foreign organization. Although Reza Shah, the founder of the dynasty, mainly targeted Communists and groups opposing his reign, Zionist activities were banned, as well. Gradually as the secular attitude of the Pahlavis prevailed, additional changes occurred in the lives of Iranian Jews, allowing them further acculturate and in some cases assimilate with the greater Iranian community.

Following the 1930s the progressive, educated Jews became involved in the reconstruction of modern Iran in every area they were allowed. They believed that by living in harmony with the majority, the prejudices between Jews and Muslims would be lessened. By the end of 1940s, while the majority of the Jewish community was enjoying the privileges of this religious tolerance, some of the younger members of the community participated in the leftist

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<sup>6</sup> Levy, *Comprehensive History of* pp. 518.

<sup>7</sup> Levy, *Comprehensive History* , p. 519.

political group, *Tudeh* party. To a certain extent the dissatisfaction reflected by the members of the Iranian Jewish community in the *Tudeh* party continued over to some members of the next generation of students. In the late 1950s and through-out the 1960s, anti-Shah activities and student riots both in universities in Iran and overseas were shared by some Jewish students as well. The small number of Jewish students active in anti-government activities believed that they could overcome the deprivations and prejudices they had been subjected to in the past by participating in national, secular causes of the country. Nevertheless the majority of Iranian Jews enjoyed the opportunities they were given in socio-economic, educational and academic areas.

The contributions of Iranian Jews to Iran in the twentieth century, on intellectual, scientific, and cultural level is well known. Due to the efforts of Alliance Israelite to educate Iranian Jews in western languages, Iranian Jewish translators were in part responsible for the introduction of European culture, and literature to Iran. Some of them were pioneers who wrote textbooks in mathematics and science. Others compiled dictionaries, started publication companies and participated in secular journalism. Professors, scientists and individuals in the medical profession also contributed to the modern universal Iranian identity. The inspiration for such intellectuals was the love of Iran and its culture, the personal relations developed among people, as well as the role of sporadic rulers and clerics who stood up for the rights of minorities, including the Jews.

The de facto recognition of the Jewish State of Israel by Iran in 1950 and the relaxed spirit of the time brought pride and confidence for the Iranian Jews, making the lives of members of the community easier. This new attitude allowed for the acculturation and in some cases assimilation of Iranian Jews into the greater Iranian community. While the Zionism introduced to Iranian Jews in 1917 was viewed more as a religious and cultural movement, by the late 1940s

and early 1950s, it was perceived more with a political significance. The change in its conceptualization was reflective of the modern and non-religious education of the Alliance Israelite, and the Pahlavi's secular-nationalistic doctrine.

After the independence of Israel, although the Iranian Government did not want to inflame the Muslim clergies in Iran and Arab countries, it did allow immigration of Iranian Jews, mostly those living in poverty, to Israel in the early 1950s. However, the speed of emigration was later slowed down by the government due to the impact of the liquidation of Jewish assets on the national economy, the improvement of diplomatic relations between the two countries, as well as the rapid modernization of Iran causing the sudden rise of the socio-economic status of Iranian Jews.

While the Jewish Community of the 1920's felt the responsibility of celebrating Zionist occasions in the 1960s, the responsibilities were shifted to the Israeli consulate and their diplomats to celebrate the birth of the State of Israel annually at the Israeli Consulate in Tehran. Iranian diplomats, journalists, and academics, as well as military personnel and cabinet members, attended the celebrations organized by the Israeli Consulate.<sup>8</sup>

The infamous World Soccer Cup, Asian Games, held in Tehran in 1968, was turning point in the modern history of Iranian Jews. The competition between the two finalists, the Israeli Maccabees and their Iranian counterparts, aroused anti-Semitic feeling on the streets of Tehran, shown through demonstrations and chanting slogans. This incident served as a warning to the Jewish community. Coupled with other socio-political and economic events, the Asian Games were incentive enough for the Iranian Jewish community to contemplate alternative places to live. However, the majority of Iranian Jews did not participate in any demonstrations

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<sup>8</sup> Meir Ezri, *The Legacy of Cyrus, My Iranian Mission* (Jerusalem: Meir Ezri, 2011), pp. 276-306.

against the Shah despite some criticisms against the regime and the rise of opposition to the Shah especially leading up to the fall of 1978.

The Islamic Revolution of 1978 gave another perspective to the identity of Iranian Jews, both in Iran and in the Diaspora. On May 14, 1979, after the execution of Habib Elghanian,<sup>9</sup> who had been accused of supporting Zionism, Ayatollah Khomeini, proclaimed during a visit paid by the Jewish religious and communal leaders, that Islam would not discriminate against the religious minorities, thus officially making a distinction between Judaism and Zionism. His statement later became the slogan of the Iranian Jewish community. Nevertheless, in the very first year of the establishment of the Islamic Republic, other prominent members of the Iranian Jewish Community were accused of having Zionist affiliations and executed on an isolated basis.<sup>10</sup>

Ever since the rise of opposition to the Shah and the later establishment of the Islamic Republic, the Jewish community in Iran, realizing the imminent threat to its wellbeing, has done everything in its power to express its disapproval of Zionism and Israel. During any crisis, Iranian Jews have been seen carrying banners or putting plaques in the hands of their children that denounce Israel and its policies. The rhetoric demonizing outsiders by both the government of the Islamic Republic and the Iranian Jewish leadership, are so similar that sometimes it is difficult to identify one from the other. As the Iranian Jewish Congressman, Dr. Siamak Moreh Sedegh, claims: “Outsiders are neither friends of the Jews nor the Islamic Republic.”<sup>11</sup>

Anti-Israel sentiment is also spread through the education of elementary through high school students. Since Khomeini’s time, the last Friday of the month of Ramadan is called

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<sup>9</sup> Orley R. Rhimian, “Habibollah Elghanayan,” in *Jewish Communities of Iran*, ed. Houman M. Sarshar (New York: Encyclopedia Iranica Foundation, 2011), pp. 399-400: Habib Elghanian is considered as “one of the most successful owners of industrial factories and manufacturing conglomerates in twentieth-century Iran.”

<sup>10</sup> Albert Danialpour in June 5, 1980 and Ebrahim Berookhim in July 31, 1980.

<sup>11</sup> *Ofogh-e Bina*, Autumn 2010 vol. 12, no. 38, p. 40.

“*Ruze - Qods*,” or “Jerusalem Day”. This day is filled with pro-Palestinian declarations through both the media and public demonstrations.<sup>12</sup> Also, on the international day of “Children,” the past leaders of the Iranian Jewish Community, included Jewish children in anti- Israel demonstrations, and published pictures of these demonstrations on the front cover of the Jewish Community’s official publication.<sup>13</sup>

Holocaust denial, as the latest gesture of Ahmadinejad, is another manifestation of Anti-Zionism and Anti-Semitism in Iranian media, television and publications.<sup>14</sup> According to the Islamic government, the Holocaust is a myth used to justify the establishment of a Jewish State. The Islamic government goes as far as comparing Zionism to Nazism, predicting the same ultimate fate for Zionism. The pro-Nazi attitude and questioning of the Holocaust, is the only anti-Zionist issue that the Iranian Jewish Community has publicly refuted.<sup>15</sup> This open objection of the leaders of the Iranian Jewish community to the issue led to the banning of the Iranian Jewish Committee’s Magazine, *Ofogh-e Bina*, for over a year and a half.

Strong ties to Iran and support of a Jewish State are two separate issues. Despite three decades of tension over the concept of Zionism in Iran, a united liberal voice of opposition to the Islamic government has emerged among all Iranians, regardless of their religious affiliation. While the current Iranian regime continues to propagate anti-Zionist sentiments, their attitudes are not representative of all Iranians or Iranian Jews living in either Iran or the diaspora. In fact, Iranian Jews and Iranian non-Jews in the diaspora have never been so united in preserving their mutual national ties while respecting each others’ religious and ethnic backgrounds. Without

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<sup>12</sup> [http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam\\_multimedia/html/final/eng/sib/4\\_04/as\\_iran.htm](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/html/final/eng/sib/4_04/as_iran.htm).

<sup>13</sup> *Ofogh-e Bina*, The Jewish community’s official publication, Sept –Nov. 2002: vol 4: 18.

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=395\\_1214927687](http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=395_1214927687); <http://smostaghaci.persianblog.ir/post/324> , <http://smostaghaci.persianblog.ir/1388/5/>.

<sup>15</sup> BBC.Persian.com, Friday, February 10, 2006:

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2006/02/printable/060210\\_mf\\_holocaust.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2006/02/printable/060210_mf_holocaust.shtml);

*Ofogh-e Bina*, vol. 7, no. 28, January 2006, p. 5; *Ofogh-e Bina*, vol. 7, no. 31, September 2006, p. 2.

undermining the right for a Jewish state to exist in the area, Iranian Jews have historically demonstrated an ability to express their attachment to both their ancestral Jewish homeland of Israel, while maintaining their sense of nationality and allegiance to Iran, their birth place and country of citizenship. In conclusion, Iranian Jews have one heritage composed of two identities, and choose to preserve both, and for Iranian Jews living abroad, this is accompanied by an allegiance to their new country.

### Embroidered fabric with golden thread

