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THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION AND THE REALITY OF JEWS IN IRAN AFTER 1979

Dr. Husam Kassai Hussein

Head of Department of Political Thought,
College of Political Science, Tikrit University

Dr. Wedad Abdolrahman al-Karni

Assistant Professor of Political Sociology, College of
Humanities and Social Sciences, King Saud University

Introduction

Following the outbreak of the Iranian revolution in 1979, the Jewish minority in Iran found itself in a highly complex situation. When the clerics took over power, anti-Zionist opinion, which had evolved in Iran since the 1940s, coinciding with the announcement of the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, was further embedded in Iranian minds as it was part of the revolutionary rhetoric. The country's rule shifted from a pro-Western and Israel-friendly government to a clerical one that harbored anti-Western, anti-imperial and anti-Zionist sentiments. The new Iranian political system was exclusionary, at odds with the country's minorities.

However, under the new Iranian political setup, the Jewish minority's conditions were slightly better when compared to other ethnic and sectarian groupings. Unfortunately, the Jews were confronted with a situation that changed one of their oldest bastions into a hostile one and unsuitable for living — the bulk of the minority had lived in Persia for more than 2,700 years. The majority of them left Iran, and the others that remained faced limitations and exploitation for political ends and for the sake of preserving the revolutionary government's religious and cultural imperatives.

This study argues that the Jews in Iran have been affected since the rise of Wilayat al-Faqih after the 1979 revolution. Despite various stipulated rights, Jews have faced limitations. The Iranian establishment aims to improve its image and neutralize accusations connected to its human rights violations at home and abroad through projecting a relatively soft policy toward its Jewish minority. In addition, it has employed the problem of the Jewish minority to deflect Western and Israeli pressures. The study will address the following questions: what is the historical context of the Jewish presence in Iran before and after the revolution? How was this minority impacted by the clerics' rise to power in 1979 and the subsequent disputes between Iran and Israel? How far has the Iranian government succeeded in employing the Jewish minority in its dispute against the West and Israel?

Historical Roots of the Jewish Presence in Iran

The first Jewish migration to Persia began in 741 BC, when the Assyrian ruler Tiglath-Pileser seized Jerusalem. He razed the city, captured and deported its inhabitants to Assyria, and then to Persia. The second migration occurred in 733 BC, under the reign of Assyrian King Shalam Nasr V (722-228 BC). He devastated Jerusalem, slaughtered its inhabitants and enslaved the rest. He marched with these captives toward the Khabour River in northern Iraq. They were successful in establishing a Jewish empire on the Caspian Sea coast.⁽¹⁾ The third migration transpired in 597 B.C., during the rule of the Chaldeans, led by King Nebuchadnezzar. He captured Jerusalem and destroyed the Kingdom of David. They kidnapped thousands of Jews and took them to Mesopotamia (Babylon), from where they moved to Persia.

Throughout time, the Jews were able to penetrate Babylonian society, occupying important positions in the court and state. They also performed religious rituals and wrote in Babylon (the Babylonian Talmud). Many prophets emerged from among the Jews throughout the Babylonian period, including the Prophet Dhu al-Kifl, whose shrine is located in the Iraqi Province of Babylon. The Jews of Babylon aided King Cyrus the Great, the first ruler of Persia (560–529 BC) and the founder of the Achaemenid state, in occupying Babylon after providing the Persians with vital intelligence about the Babylonian army and the city's fortifications, which fell in 539 BC. In exchange for this Jewish assistance, King Cyrus the Great granted them the right to return to Palestine. Yet, many Jews preferred to remain in Persia,⁽²⁾ and the Jews sprang up in Babylonian centers and then appeared in Persian regions and cities such as Hamadan and Susa (an Ahwazi city located in the Arab region situated

in south and southwestern Iran). The Jews there are Ahwazi Arabs, and this city is home to many Jewish landmarks and it is also the home of Prophet Daniel and others.⁽³⁾

The Children of Israel were 42,360 strong. They were allowed to build a temple in Jerusalem, and King Cyrus the Great favored the Jews to the point that most of Persia's kings followed in his footsteps when dealing with them. The Jews' position in Persia was elevated, and they held high posts. During the reign of King Shapur II (310-379 BC), their ties with the Persians grew stronger. The Jews began to send presents to the Persian monarchs, and their relationship with them grew stronger. As a result, they took part in Persian battles throughout Khosrau I's rule.⁽⁴⁾

The Jewish population in Iran expanded and dispersed throughout the Sasanian dynasty (226-642 AD). They did, however, face persecution on a regular basis. The invasion of Arab Muslims in 642 AD terminated the Persian Empire's rule and established Islam as the state religion. Because of economic and societal circumstances, some Jews converted to Islam as a result of this turn of events. Yet, they enjoyed extensive rights throughout this time.

The Jewish minority experienced fundamental transformations throughout the Safavid dynasty (1501-1722 A.D.). They were persecuted, as were other religious minorities in Persia. Except during the reign of Shah Abbas II, they were forced to convert to Shiism as part of the Safavid's campaign to spread Shiism. Under his rule, the persecution of Jews was briefly halted.

Throughout the 19th century, Jews largely endured persecution and discrimination. At the end of the Qajari dynasty, however, they enjoyed some rights such as the right to have representation in the 1907 Parliament. When Britain occupied Iran in 1917, protection was given to the Jewish minority. And against the backdrop of the rise of Zionism, the role of Jews in Iran grew. The organization Preserving the Languages of the Past was established which carried out purely Zionist activities. In 1918, the Zionist Union of Iran's Jews was created, opening offshoots in other Iranian cities. In 1919, the first Zionist conference of the Jews of Iran was convened in Tehran, which was chaired by Azizullah Naim, with the participation of all Zionist organizations in Iran. The Zionist movement in Iran actively promoted the formation of influential Zionist associations among the youth of Iran's Jewish minority for the sake of collecting donations, aiding Zionist institutions to purchase Palestinian land, spreading the Hebrew language and literature, and publishing educational periodicals and magazines. In Tehran, the Persian magazine "Hajeulah" (Salvation) was published. Furthermore, the first and most important books for teaching Hebrew were printed in Tehran in 1918.⁽⁵⁾ Yet another Jewish magazine was published in Tehran under the name Sina, which was the mouthpiece of the Zionist movement in Tehran.⁽⁶⁾ This is in addition to creating the first Zionist league in Tehran. In addition, in 1914, the Society for Teaching the Hebrew Language was founded in the city of Hamedan. The first Zionist association in Iran was founded in the same year. *Shalom*, a Zionist newspaper, was published in Persian and Hebrew.⁽⁷⁾ There is no doubt that the state's directives contributed to the expansion of Jewish-Zionist activities.

From the time Reza Shah came to power in 1925 until the end of the Pahlavi family's control in 1979, the country was secular and Western-oriented. This greatly benefited Jews, who acted freely and played an important role in economic and cultural life. When World War II broke out, Iran provided a safe haven for thousands of refugees from Europe, Soviet Central Asia, Iraq and the Caucasus and was also the dreamland for Polish Jews and Christians in Central Asia. It was also a welcome respite from the Soviet Union's famine years. "For them... it's heaven," said Warsaw-born Rabbi Haim Ze'ev Hirschberg. All in all, it could be said that the Persian Jews have long played an active role in the social life of Iran. The Jewish community partakes in Jewish and Persian celebrations alike, which points to the fact that they are proud of their history and role in Iranian culture. The reign of Reza Shah, the king deposed by the Khomeini-led revolution, is regarded as the golden age of Persian Jewry. While the shah's oppressive domestic policies and violent response to opposition enraged many Iranians, his partial economic reforms allowed Persian Jews to thrive.⁽⁸⁾

The Jewish Minority in Iran and Shifts in the Relationship With Israel

Following the establishment of the State of Israel, a strong alliance grew between Tehran and Tel Aviv since Iran was quite significant in the "Periphery Doctrine" developed by Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion in the 1950s. This doctrine stated that Israel should cultivate deep ties with the region's non-Arab countries to protect itself from hostile Arab neighbors. Non-Arab countries such as Israel, Iran, Turkey and Ethiopia all faced active Arab states, which facilitated the formation of the periphery alliance.⁽⁹⁾

In this setting, Iran and Israel saw Iraq as a shared threat, providing another reason for collaboration. By the 1960s, Israel was assisting the Iraqi Kurds in their war against the Iraqi government. Iran likewise saw the Iraqi Kurds as the Iraqi government's Achilles' heel. As a result, Mossad and SAVAK joined together to assist the Iraqi Kurds in their fight against the Iraqi government, and collaboration between the two countries intensified on several security and intelligence fronts. It is important to note that the collaboration between Israel and Iran was not founded solely on shared fears. The shah also had an exaggerated idea about Israel's clout in Washington. He believed that Israel could help him gain the support of the Kennedy administration which was critical of his rule. Notwithstanding the intensification of Iranian public condemnation of Israel following the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War in 1967, the shah continued to strengthen ties with the Jewish state after Israel's triumph over Egyptian, Syrian and Jordanian armies. He also expressed his belief that Israel's growing standing would lead to enhancing Iran's position as the chief regional power.⁽¹⁰⁾

Economic cooperation between the two countries also improved, particularly in the energy sector. Cooperation progressed to the point where advanced missile systems were being developed and secret deals were struck. Consequently, the Pahlavi administration's remarkable relationship with Israel, as well as the secular character of the Pahlavi government, created an appropriate and inspiring atmosphere for

Jews to remain in Iran. Moreover, many Iranian Jews considered Persia to be their second-most important country after the State of Israel.

However, the 1979 revolution led to an important shift in Tehran's relations with Tel Aviv. Immediately after the revolution, Iranian foreign policy was saturated with anti-Israel sentiment and ideological zeal. The revolutionaries in Iran did not consider toppling the shah as their ultimate goal per se. But it was just the first step down the path of liberating the wider Middle East from US and Zionist hegemony. The anti-Israel rhetoric escalated, thus putting the Jewish minority under unprecedented pressures.

As a result of the chaotic situation and mounting concerns about the growing clout of clerics and anti-Israel rhetoric, some Jews fled Iran in the months following the shah's overthrow. Because the majority of them were traders and businessmen who had forged connections with Israel under the shah, they feared retaliation from the new revolutionary government.⁽¹¹⁾

It could be said that until 1979, Jews were never forced to flee Iran, including those who had settled in Israel between 1948 and 1979. However, with the outbreak of the revolution, the arrest and arbitrary trial and subsequent execution of the Jewish businessman Habib Elghanian, one of the richest and most powerful personalities in the Jewish community in Iran and the honorary president of the community in May 1979 by a firing squad on charges of communicating with Zionists and Israel, was the spark that prompted many Iranian Jews to leave the country. Before the 1979 revolution, there were 100,000 Jews, but after the clerics assumed power, the vast majority of them fled Iran. Today, the number of Persian Jews in Iran varies between 9,000 and 20,000.⁽¹²⁾

Yet, and despite the proclaimed hostility, mutual interests — Iran's priority in sustaining the theocratic republic and Israel's ambition to weaken Iraq — led to continued collaboration between Iran and Israel in the 1980s. This cooperation resulted in Israel providing Iran with Phantom fighter jets and other military equipment. In return, Khomeini allowed large numbers of Jews to leave the country to settle in Israel and the United States. This cooperation, which was based on deals and fleeting pragmatic interests, does not paint a full picture of the nature of the relations between Tehran and Tel Aviv in 1979 nor does it provide a complete picture of the Iranian regime's attitude toward the Jewish minority in light of the escalating hostility toward Israel at the official and popular levels.

Hostility and rivalry began to deepen between the two sides when remarkable shifts in Iranian foreign policy took place. Iran, given its transboundary project, created the Lebanese Hezbollah, which emerged in response to the Israeli occupation of Lebanon in 1982 and afterwards became Iran's longest arm perched on Israel's borders. Iran's development of ballistic missiles raised the concern of Israel's security establishment. This is in addition to Iran's nuclear ambitions, which have been the main cause of hostility over the past two decades. Moreover, Israel now holds the view that the manifold challenges facing the region are primarily created by the Iranian establishment and its regional proxies. Furthermore, the signing of peace

treaties by Egypt and several Arab nations beginning with the Camp David Accord in 1979 and subsequent agreements generated significant shifts in regional relations patterns. These developments turned the cordial pre-revolution relations between Iran and Israel into ones beset with hostility and wide-scale confrontation.⁽¹³⁾

The situation of Jews completely changed after the 1979 revolution. Before the revolution, the number of Jews exceeded 100,000. Against the backdrop of the 1979 revolution, a considerable number of Jews resorted to migration to Israel while the rest preferred to stay in Iran. Overall, it can be said that the Iranian revolution caused a substantial change in the situation of Jews in Iran for two main reasons: the first is the ideological nature of the ruling establishment which favors the Shiite majority at the expense of others. The second reason is the Iranian government's ideological position that is hostile to Israel. The Jews, accordingly, have experienced difficult challenges since 1979 revolution.⁽¹⁴⁾

The Dilemma of Jews Under Wilayat al-Faqih

Despite the hostility between Iran and Israel, which reached the extent of confrontation, the Iranian government was keen not to antagonize its Jewish minority and make it a party to the dispute (with Israel). In his religious edict, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini stated that the Jewish minority in Iran was a minority that enjoyed full protection and warned against any attacks against its members. Khomeini attempted to portray Zionism as a savage enemy for both Iran and Jews, whose historical existence in Iran dates back to 2,500 years BC and who were a core component of Iranian society.⁽¹⁵⁾

At the same time, the Jewish community members who did not leave Iran were keen not to put themselves in a position that could make them subject to suspicion and persecution, hence affecting their survival and interests. Moreover, leaders of the Jewish minority developed a symbiotic relationship with the Iranian government to enhance the community's interests. Iran attempted to employ the Jewish minority to polish its image and achieve its interests in the face of the United States and Israel.

The Iranian Constitution ensured the rights of the Jewish minority by recognizing three official religions in addition to Islam — Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism.⁽¹⁶⁾ Hence, the Jewish minority, along with Christians and Zoroastrians,⁽¹⁷⁾ was granted the right to representation in the Iranian Parliament. In the successive Iranian governments, the quota system ensured the Jews a single seat in Parliament through elections that were determined by the Iranian Constitution.⁽¹⁸⁾

In comparison to other minorities, we find that the Jewish minority which remained in Iran enjoyed freedom in performing religious rituals and building synagogues. Furthermore, the Iranian government granted permits to establish charities and associations in the cities where Jews resided, particularly in the capital Tehran, Hamadan and Isfahan.⁽¹⁹⁾ In Tehran alone, there are 13 active synagogues, five Jewish schools, two kindergartens and a 100-bed Jewish hospital. There are active local Jewish communities in several other Iranian cities, including Shiraz, Isfahan and

Kermanshah and they have their own respective associations. However, living as protected second-class citizens under a Shiite-clerical power structure is very complicated. There is no injustice, but there definitely are restrictions.⁽²⁰⁾

Iran has struggled to fulfill its constitutional guarantees toward its minorities. Arabs, Balochis and Iranian Kurds face discrimination and repression. The Iranian government also does not recognize the Baha'i faith, thus Bahai's face more persecution and repression than any other minority. Even Sunni Muslims, who constitute the majority throughout the Middle East but are a minority in Iran, lack the rights that their Shiite fellow countrymen have. The government does not allow Sunnis to be engaged in political and administrative activities and deprives them of assuming state positions.⁽²¹⁾ This is in addition to the restrictions which have impacted their freedom to worship and perform religious rituals.⁽²²⁾ Moreover, Sunni scholars are subjected to insults and arbitrary arrests, with some were assassinated in the past.⁽²³⁾

In contrast, the Iranian government has permitted Jews to construct places of worship. Furthermore, the IRGC assisted in the recovery of an ancient Torah stolen from the Jewish minority, one of the world's oldest manuscripts. It was returned to them in Shiraz, Iran's southern city.⁽²⁴⁾ Meanwhile, Sunnis are still deprived of having their own mosque in the capital Tehran. Rabbi Yehuda Jeremy stated, "Sharia law governs everything, and all houses of worship are open. We have the right to worship freely."⁽²⁵⁾

At the social level, Jews in Iran stated that their situation improved after President Hassan Rouhani took office. He allowed Jewish schools to close on Saturdays and allocated nearly \$400 to a Jewish hospital in Tehran. The Jewish minority secured the right to full "blood money," ending the significant financial discrimination between Muslims and followers of other faiths in this respect.⁽²⁶⁾

Additionally, Jewish religious leaders who spoke up against Zionism and the State of Israel have enjoyed state protection. Jews have also achieved several successes at the societal level recently such as the closure of Jewish schools on Saturdays rather than the Muslim off-day Friday.⁽²⁷⁾

Nonetheless, given the views of the more fanatical Iranian hardliners, the aforesaid does not mean that the Jewish minority does not face marginalization, exclusion or challenges. For example, during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who questioned the Holocaust, Jewish relations with the Iranian government deteriorated. Jews and others around the world condemned his remarks.

According to Haroun Yashayaei, the leader of the Jewish Committee in Tehran, and Maurice Motamed, who represented the Jewish minority in the Iranian Parliament, denying the Holocaust — the gruesome historic tragedy — is an affront to all Jewish communities worldwide. It is noticed that Iranian Jews speak up about the different forms of discrimination experienced by their community. But they do not question the legitimacy of the Iranian government or the Islamic Sharia and system which governs them. Notwithstanding the relaxation of immigration restrictions, Jews living in Iran are hesitant to leave, even though Israel offers cash prizes ranging from \$10,000 for individuals to \$61,000 for families. However, this does not mean

that the Iranian government is tolerant toward Jews leaving for Israel. Ruhollah Kadhodazadeh was executed in 1998 for assisting Jews to illegally immigrate. Iran has also tightened measures against some of those who visit Israel to curb the number of these visits. They face jail, fines and questioning. Two Jews were sentenced to 91 days in prison. The sentence was later reduced to 20 days.⁽²⁸⁾

As Iranian Jews are intrinsically linked to Iran's relationship with Israel, the Iranian government has attempted to employ them in its struggle against the West and Israel by controlling them. In this regard, we can highlight the ruling establishment's desire to employ Jewish elites in Iran to improve its image abroad. We can mention Hassan Rouhani escorting the lone Jewish representative in the Iranian Parliament to the United Nations summit in New York in 2013. This is an indication of employing and exploiting the Jewish minority to improve Iran's image at an international forum. This is in addition to the dispatchment of Iranian Jewish rabbis to the United States and the West where they speak positively about their circumstances.⁽²⁹⁾

The Iranian government has also employed the Jewish minority in the context of its battles at the international level. Iran has depended on rabbis to intervene and mediate to resolve crises and bridge the gap with the West.⁽³⁰⁾ A large group of Jewish rabbis — 340 rabbis — sent a letter to US congressmen in which they urged them to support the Iranian nuclear deal as it would achieve the United States' and Israel's security. This position was in opposition to that of the Israel lobby that opposed the nuclear deal.⁽³¹⁾ Through their ties with Jewish communities overseas, Iran's rabbis have played a key role in improving Iran's image. Iran also contacted Jews who are against the establishment of the Israeli state – part of its efforts to refute accusations of enmity against Judaism as a religion and affirming that it is against the Zionist project. For example, Ahmadinejad met on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly with 12 rabbis from Neturei Karta who oppose the establishment of the State of Israel. The rabbis lauded the Iranian president. Rabbi Yisroel Dovid Weiss, spokesman for the Jewish group, said that Ahmadinejad was not an enemy of the Jewish people and several thousand Jews live in Iran without persecution.⁽³²⁾ Yedioth Ahronoth newspaper revealed that Israeli journalist Orly Azoulay traveled to Iran and remained there for several days with the aim of preparing reports about the conditions of Jews there. The reports concluded that the Iranian people love Jews, given the historical ties between the two peoples.⁽³³⁾

Conclusion

Persia occupies an important place in ancient Jewish history. Jews are indebted to Persians and their King Cyrus the Great for allowing them to return to Jerusalem and settle there in the past. Iran is home to the biggest Jewish minority in the world despite the decline of its numbers after the establishment of Israel. The clerical establishment that took power in 1979 pushed many Jews to depart for Israel and the United States, which reduced the number of Jews in Iran by 90% over the past four decades — as previously mentioned.

It is clear that the Jews who remained in Iran were keen not to engage outsiders in the context of their relationship with the Iranian establishment. They wanted to address their issues directly with the Iranian political system. Perhaps this played an important role in the successes they have achieved despite their sensitive position in light of the growing tensions between Tehran and Tel Aviv.

However, despite the Jewish minority in Iran enjoying a special status under the Wilayat al-Faqih ruling system, Jews face a number of challenges, primarily in the context of the government's tensions with Israel. They are obliged to prove all the time that they are uninterested (in establishing good ties with Israel) or increasing cooperation. This comes despite the fact that many of them have families in Israel and have visited Israel — maybe via a third country. Perhaps tensions between Iran and Israel will escalate, with Tel Aviv striking at Iran's depth. At this point, the Jewish minority will face more restrictions and scrutiny.

The Iranian government strives to demonstrate that it is adopting a sensible policy toward minorities by addressing the issue of the Jewish minority. This minority, however, does not have full citizenship rights. Members of the Jewish minority are barred from holding positions of power in government ministries. Principals of Jewish schools, on the other hand, must be Muslim. Additionally, some Jewish community members have made complaints about the application of Sharia to non-Muslims in the areas of inheritance, retribution and blood money. Despite the government's discrimination against Jews and its treatment of them as suspicious until the contrary is proven, it has succeeded in employing their leaders to play a diplomatic role to improve its image at home and promote the fact that it is hostile to Zionism rather than Jews in general. Furthermore, the government has engaged with Jews to settle sensitive issues at the global level, particularly those relating to its human rights record, and to polish its highly tainted image in this regard. The ruling establishment also employs Jews to advance its interests in the nuclear file in Western political circles and to put pressure on foreign lobbies to alleviate pressure on Iran. Leaders of Iran's Jewish community perhaps grudgingly accept to play this role to protect the remaining Jewish presence and heritage, which is threatened in Iran from their perspective, or for fear of the state's repression and crackdown on them.

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