

Record: 1

Title: Jews in Iran describe a life of freedom despite anti-Israel actions by Tehran.

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Source: Christian Science Monitor; 2/3/98, Vol. 90 Issue 47, p7, 0p, 2 color

Document Type: Article

Subject Terms: JEWS -- Iran

Geographic Terms: IRAN Report Available

Abstract: Examines the Jewish community in Iran, the largest in the Middle East outside of Israel. The official recognition of Jews in the Islamic Constitution; Comments from Haroun Yashyei, chairman of the Central Jewish Committee in Iran; The rights and freedoms Jews are granted; Why many left Iran after the Islamic Revolution; Why the community hopes for peace in the Middle East; Why most Jews do not want to leave Iran, despite the anti-Israel sentiment of the government.

Lexile: 1110

Full Text Word Count: 997

ISSN: 08827729

Accession Number: 178016

Database: MAS Ultra - School Edition

Section: International

Islam, Judaism, under one tent

JEWS IN IRAN DESCRIBE A LIFE OF FREEDOM DESPITE ANTI-ISRAEL ACTIONS BY TEHRAN

Dateline: TEHRAN, IRAN

One of the most striking of many murals in Iran's capital, Tehran, is a towering portrait of Fathi Shkaki, a leader of the militant Palestinian group, Islamic Jihad. He was assassinated by Israeli agents in 1995 after he masterminded a series of suicide bombings against Jewish civilians.

A slogan beneath his face hails him as a hero of the Islamic revolution in Palestine.

Yet, stroll a little farther along Palestine Street and you come to the Abrishami Synagogue, the biggest of 23 synagogues in Tehran. It is regularly attended by some 1,000 worshippers.

It comes as a surprise to many visitors to discover that Iran, a country so hostile to Israel and with a reputation for intolerance, is home to a small but vibrant Jewish community that is an officially recognized religious minority under Iran's 1979 Islamic Constitution.

"[Ayatollah Ruhollah] Khomeini didn't mix up our community with Israel and Zionism - he saw us as Iranians," says Haroun Yashyaei, a film producer and chairman of the Central Jewish Community in Iran. Like Iran's Armenian Christians, Jews are tolerated as "people of the book" and allowed to practice their religion freely, provided they do not proselytize.

They elect their own deputy to the 270-seat Parliament and enjoy certain rights of self-administration. Jewish burial and divorce laws are accepted by Islamic courts. Jews are conscripted into the Army.

"We are one of the oldest Jewish communities in the world," Mr. Yashyaei says. "When Muslims came to Iran, we had already been here for centuries."

"Take it from me, the Jewish community here faces no difficulties. If some people left after the revolution, maybe it's because they were scared," says Farangis Hassidim, a forceful but good-humored woman who is charge of the only Jewish hospital in Iran. She adds: "Our position here is not as bad as people abroad may think. We practice our religion freely, we have all our festivals, we have our own schools and kindergartens."

For her, the well-equipped hospital in central Tehran is a model of religious harmony. "We have about 200 staff, 30 percent of them Jewish," she says. "These days, I'd say about 5 percent of our patients are Jewish, the rest are Muslims." A sign outside the hospital reads in Hebrew: "Love thy neighbor as thyself."

Nevertheless, many Jews emigrated after the 1979 Islamic revolution to the United States, the favored destination, and to Israel. In just under two decades, their numbers in Iran have dwindled from 100,000 to about 40,000, 25,000 of them in Tehran.

The shah, overthrown in 1979, was on good terms with the Jewish state; opposition to it was a cornerstone of Khomeini's revolution.

[A tight-knit community](#)

Like other minorities, many Iranian Jews feared an uncertain future, although their religious rights were enshrined in the Constitution. Nevertheless, Iran's Jewish community remains the largest in the Middle East outside of Israel, and human rights activists confirm that members are not persecuted because of their religion.

Since the Islamic revolution, the Jewish community has become more tight-knit and devout, according to worshippers at the Abrishami Synagogue.

After prayers, there is a festive atmosphere as families, greeting each other with the Sabbath greeting "Shabbat Shalom," spill out into the courtyard. Savory snacks are handed out as families share gossip and children dart up and down the stairs playing tag. A small portrait of Ayatollah Khomeini is painted on the wall of the stairwell.

Privately, there are grumbles about discrimination, much of it of a social or bureaucratic nature. Some complain it is impossible for Jews to get senior positions in Iran Air, the national airline, or in the national oil company. A woman teacher says she has been passed by for promotion several times because she is Jewish and now hopes to emigrate to Los Angeles. A car-parts dealer says Jews have to wait much longer for travel documents and exit visas.

The most pressing complaint is that, despite many petitions to parliament, Jewish schools must open on Saturdays, the Jewish Sabbath. Like so many other Iranians, those at the Abrishami synagogue are relying on the new president, Mohamad Khatami, to support them.

"He's a kind man; let's hope he can help us with this schools question," says the parts dealer.

Jews also hope for a genuine Middle East peace settlement that would enable a more moderate Iran to recognize Israel, where many Iranian Jews have relatives. That clearly is a long way off, despite hints over the weekend of some kind of people-to-people dialogue. Even Mr. Khatami, with his reputation as a relative moderate, called Israel a "racist, terrorist state" in a recent interview on CNN television.

Contacts with the Jewish state are banned, although some visit through third countries, while mail is usually routed through London.

Why leave?

At an antiques shop in central Tehran, Isaac, the elderly owner, says many Jews who once owned shops along the broad, bustling avenue have left in the past 20 years.

He has not seen his sister since she emigrated to Israel 16 years ago, but he has no plans to leave.

"The Jewish community has been here for centuries, and this shop has been in the family for more than 50 years," he says, reeling off the famous customers who have visited. "Gen. [Charles] de Gaulle was here.

"But look at this," he adds, brandishing an old black-and-white photograph of himself with his arm around curvaceous 1950s film star Gina Lollobrigida, who sports a beehive hairdo.

"Really, it's OK here, and it's home," he says.

PHOTO (COLOR): Political voice: Manouchehr Eliasi represents Iran's Jews in Parliament.

PHOTO (COLOR): Proof of 'anti-Israel' Iran? Israeli soldier displays a spent artillery shell Israel claims was made in Iran for Islamic militants fighting to drive Israel from Lebanon.

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By Michael Theodoulou, Special to The Christian Science Monitor

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