

ARTICLE

Combating the Double Erasure: Can a Jew (Kalimi) be an Iranian in the Islamic Republic?

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Abstract

Since the 1979 revolution, Iranian Jews have faced two powerful and inherently contradictory calls to compromise their voice and identity. From one side, Israel has consistently held the opinion that as an at-risk community they should be evacuated and resettled. On the other, Iran's revolutionary regime has made "Islamic" a centerpiece of Iranian identity, placing Jewish identity directly at odds with what it means to be an Iranian. For decades, foreign opposition groups have spread baseless and unsubstantiated claims suggesting that Iranian Jews are to be placed in concentration camps or forced to wear yellow stars. At the same time, Iran's top politicians repeatedly peddle anti-Semitic innuendo and promote Holocaust denial conspiracies. Yet such narratives miss the central fact rarely acknowledged in Israel or Western academic and public spheres: Iranian Jews have continued to maintain ownership of their story and narrative as both Iranian and Jewish. This article seeks to analyze the navigation of Iranian Jews between their struggle as a religious minority in the Islamic Republic and maintenance of their autonomous voice as represented outside Iran.

Keywords: Iran; Jews; minorities

In 2014 the Israeli parliament passed a law setting 30 November as the "Day of Remembrance for the Departure and Expulsion of Jews from the Arab Countries and Iran."¹ The date was chosen for its symbolism, as it directly follows November 29, the day on which, in 1947, the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine was adopted, leading to the establishment of Israel. In Israel the day is marked annually with ceremonies, academic conferences, and exhibitions.² This legislation's attempt to lump many different stories together into a single simple-to-digest narrative was flawed from the outset. A fundamental flaw with this construction is the notion of collective expulsion of Jews from all Middle East and North Africa (MENA) states, including Iran. In this article I argue that the inclusion of Iran in

¹ See the text of the law that passed on 23 June 2014; "The Law for the Day of Remembrance of the Departure and Expulsion of Jews from the Arab Countries and Iran, 2014," The Knesset, accessed 29 May 2023, http://fs.knesset.gov.il/19/law/19_isr_303812.pdf. See also the example for the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs text for the annual day of remembrance. Press Releases, "Jewish Refugees Expelled from Arab Lands and from Iran," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 30 November 2021, Accessed 29 May 2023, <https://www.gov.il/en/Departments/news/jewish-refugees-expelled-from-arab-lands-and-from-iran-30-november-2021>

² For an expanded analysis of this law and traditions that it nurtured in Israel and the United States, see Lior Sternfeld and Menashe Anzi, "Israel Is Rewriting the History of Middle Eastern Jews from Propaganda," *Haaretz*, 2 December 2019, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium.MAGAZINE-israel-is-rewriting-the-history-of-middle-eastern-jews-for-propaganda-1.8196808?fbclid=IwAR3sO-HSCXM70IWn_YN3vchUor0t99QjnSML9C69clJlds8H6XVoD6sscs.

the memorial law and the grand “expulsion” narrative stems from a profoundly erroneous analysis of the modern history of Jews in Iran and politically rooted motivations to create a unified narrative of Jewish exodus from Middle Eastern countries.

At the same time the law and narrative mean to erase the Iranian Jewish presence in Iran and deny historical agency to that community, to dismantle the anomaly that is the mere existence of a Jewish community in Iran in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, and to reaffirm the long-held belief that there cannot be a Jewish presence in Iran in the age of the Islamic Republic. To be sure, I do not deny the existence of anti-Semitism in Iran or the attendant hardships that Iranian Jews continue to experience in their navigation of a terribly stymied and complicated situation. My intent is to situate them outside of the binary of either lying about their true aspirations to satisfy the ever-suspicious regime, or hiding or fleeing the country when they have the opportunity.

Such a corrective seeks to amend the way in which we read and write the contemporary history of the Jews of Iran, and to let readers see the many possibilities for Jewish existence in postrevolutionary Iran. By tracing the radical transformation of the Iranian Jews in the second half of the 20th century, until the revolution, I hope to contextualize the once-close historical and political ties between Iran and Israel. Only in this manner can one properly understand the participation of Jews in the revolution, their adjustment to life in the Islamic Republic, and their participation in the postrevolutionary nation-building project. By resituating the 20th-century experience of the Iranian Jewish community in this way, the conventional wisdom surrounding the presidencies of Mahmud Ahmadinejad (2005–13) and Hassan Rouhani (2013–21) is dramatically altered.

The narrative that connects the exodus of MENA Jews to the establishment of Israel aims to create a correlation between the mass departure of Jews due to the supposed inherent anti-Semitism of Middle Eastern societies and the inevitable solution: emigration to Israel. This is the reason that the Israeli legislature chose the 30 November date. This date—in 1947—marks, according to most historiographical traditions, the beginning of the 1948 Palestine war (also known as Israel’s War of Independence, and the Nakba). Selecting this date suggests that any Jewish outflow from any Middle Eastern country, whether it occurred in 1948, 1956, or 1967, is as if it happened in 1948, explicitly because of the creation of Israel and the (again, supposed) immemorial Muslim–Jewish rivalry.

However, when we examine Jewish emigration from the Middle East and North Africa, we see a profoundly different pattern, one that is better connected to colonialism and the decolonization of the 1950s and 1960s. In the past decade, scholars have examined the legal structures that distinguished religious minorities from Muslims in Muslim-majority countries and cultivated their hybrid or empire-oriented identities. The legal and social structures granted privileges to Jews and Christians who performed their Western identity and rewarded them with capitulatory rights, representation, upward mobility, and more. In some cases, the ultimate reward was imperial citizenship (Algeria following the Cremieux Decree), and in others the social and economic benefits of easier access to imperial resources (bureaucracy, economy, education) in the MENA country, or in the metropole.³

These colonial and imperial identities (that led to opportunities) were supplemented by cultural projects, such as European-style education in the French-medium Alliance Israelite Universelle schools and missionary and private schools that bestowed upon them a *lingua franca*, different than the majority society’s language. This education and professional training opened doors for them to travel to the metropole for additional education and opportunities. Jewish experiences in the 19th and 20th centuries were inadvertently tied to the colonial condition.

³ Joshua Schreier, *Arabs of the Jewish Faith: The Civilizing Mission in Colonial Algeria* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010); Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Saharan Jews and the Fate of French Algeria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 41–57; Jonathan Wyrzten, *Making Morocco: Colonial Intervention and the Politics of Identity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 179–218; Jessica M. Marglin, *Across Legal Lines: Jews and Muslims in Modern Morocco* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 21–52.

Arguably 1948 signaled the beginning of mass emigration from most of the Arab countries (in a process that lasted almost two decades). Nevertheless, it is not the only explanation for the departure of the majority of Jews. Iraq is perhaps the clearest example of an exodus directly resulting from the establishment of Israel.⁴ Morocco, which had the biggest Jewish population in the MENA region in 1948, with some 250,000 Jews, saw about 90,000 leave between 1948 and 1956.⁵ In the decade following Moroccan independence and decolonization the number of Jews remaining in the country dwindled rapidly. By 1967, 53,000 remained in Morocco, and that number shrunk steadily; in 2022 only 3000 lived in Morocco.⁶ Similarly, the Jews of Tunisia left after independence in 1956, most of the Jews of Algeria emigrated in 1961 and 1962, and Jews left Libya in 1951.⁷ In Egypt, the majority of the community left in 1956 following a period in which there was a revolution (which was quintessentially anticolonial); a war against Israel, France, and Britain; rising xenophobia; and the implementation of “Egyptianization” laws that targeted noncitizens, a category that included many Jews, but also members of the other foreign communities, predominantly Greeks and Italians.⁸ Lebanon saw its Jewish community leave with the eruption of the Lebanese Civil War in 1958, domestic political strife not directly connected to the establishment of Israel.⁹

To the contrary, during these two decades in which the MENA countries lost most of their Jewish populations, Iran witnessed an incredible period of rapid integration of Jews (and other minorities) into Iranian society. During the 1950s and 1960s Jews increasingly became part of the nation-building project of the Mohammad Reza Pahlavi era (r. 1941–79).¹⁰ This is not to say that between 1948 and the 1979 Iranian revolution the community did not experience drastic changes in its size and experience, but it helps to explain the anomaly of the Iranian Jewish experience in the Middle Eastern context. I argue that the absence of a dominant colonial power in Iran, or the existence of a merely semicolonial structure, annulled the establishment of the configuration of Jewish dependency on European powers or, at the least, avoided the typical strong identification of Jews with foreign powers, one that was normal in societies that were under direct colonial or imperial rule. Although Zionism had significant presence among

⁴ For a thorough analysis of the 1948–51 Jewish emigration out of Iraq, see Orit Bashkin, *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 183–228.

⁵ Alma Rachel Heckman, *The Sultan’s Communists: Moroccan Jews and the Politics of Belonging* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021), 133–42.

⁶ André Levi, *Return to Casablanca: Jews, Muslims, and an Israeli Anthropologist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 70–79; Emily Gottreich, *Jewish Morocco: A History from Pre-Islamic to Postcolonial Times* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2020), 4.

⁷ Claire Eldridge, “Remembering the Other: Postcolonial Perspectives on Relationships between Jews and Muslims in French Algeria,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 11, no. 3 (2012): 299–317; Todd Shepard, “Algerian Nationalism, Zionism, and French Laïcité: A History of Ethnoreligious Nationalisms and Decolonization,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 3 (2013): 445–67; Johannes Heuman, “The Silent Disappearance of Jews from Algeria: French Anti-Racism in the Face of Antisemitism in Algeria during the Decolonization,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* (2022): 1–20, doi: 10.1080/14725886.2022.2027211.

⁸ Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics, and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998); Najat Abdulhaq, *Jewish and Greek Communities in Egypt: Entrepreneurship and Business before Nasser* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016), 169–200.

⁹ Kirsten E. Schulze, *The Jews of Lebanon: Between Coexistence and Conflict* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2009), 100–18.

¹⁰ See Lior B. Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion: Jewish Histories of Twentieth-Century Iran* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019). In the early 1940s Iranian Jews constituted overwhelmingly an impoverished lower class. By the mid- to late 1970, around 80 percent of Iranian Jews were middle and upper-middle class, an additional 10 percent were among the country’s elite, and only 10 percent remained impoverished. This process laid the foundation for a sense of belonging of Iranian Jews that lasted well into the 21st century. The fact that it happened simultaneously with the existence of Israel, the close alliance between Iran and Israel, migration and return migration to and from Israel, all allowed Iranian Jews to develop a “multi-hyphenated identity” that helped them embrace their Iranian identity, their Jewish identity that has existence without Israel, and an affinity to Israel that can manifest in many ways but necessitates no political identification with Zionism.

Iranian Jews as a cultural and to various degrees a political movement, Iranian Jews overwhelmingly identified with the Iranian national project, one which they claimed as their own.¹¹

The Anomaly of the Kalimian

This anomaly has produced serious misunderstanding of the history and conditions of Jews in Iran, especially in the second half of the 20th century and continuing into the 21st century. There are three main names for Jews in Persian: Yahudi, which is considered neutral; Juhud, which is derogatory and insulting; and Kalimi, which is the most respectful and comes from the Qur'anic epithet of Moses, Kalim-Allah, the one who spoke with Allah. The Kalimian are therefore the followers of Moses.¹² As of 2022, among Middle Eastern nations the Jewish population of Iran remained second only to Israel. Still, with around 15,000 to 20,000 Jews remaining in the country, it is only a shadow of its former self.¹³ In the decades between the 1940s and the 1960s, Iran saw its Jewish population rise to 100,000 individuals as a result of regional migration from Iraq and even return migration from Israel.¹⁴ It was in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution and the four decades since that the Jewish population shrunk to just a fraction of its prerevolutionary size. Despite this, Jewish history has not ended in Iran. Ever since 1979, Iranian Jews have battled attempts to erase their voices and narratives in Iran by the imposition of a conflated identity (Jewish/Zionist) and the growing "need" to be Muslim to be Iranian.

The attempted narrative erasure by the Israeli state is part of a much wider phenomenon. Over four decades of conflict between Iran and the West, particularly regarding Zionism, have distorted the Israeli public's ability to understand Iranian society. Additionally, the nature of Iranian historiography, which tends to focus on the Shi'i Persian majority and write history through their experiences, disregards the many religious and ethnic minorities who participate in Iranian society.

At present Israel and Iran remain trenchant enemies, embroiled in an ongoing cycle of recrimination involving vows of destruction, proxy wars, and accusations of human rights violations. Israeli public perception is that anti-Semitism within the Islamic republican context is more radical and dangerous, since, allegedly, it is rooted historically in Islam. The broader context of Iran's relations with the West after the 1979 revolution—the American hostage crisis, President George W. Bush's "axis of evil" address, the subsequent invasion of Iraq, the nuclear negotiations, President Ahmadinejad's repeated denial of the Holocaust, the confrontational anti-Western rhetoric of the Islamic Republic's regime, Israeli threats of and reputed military

¹¹ The one qualification, of course, will be the relationship of Iranian Jews and Zionism. But for Iranian Jews, generally speaking, Zionism was not perceived as a political project that had any relevance to their lives. There were also several stages in the development of Iranian Zionism, from indigenous Zionism to state-sponsored Zionism. In the earlier stages, Zionism was mostly supporting a Jewish national home for Jews who could not stay in their homelands. Zionism had turned, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, into a cultural aspect of the Iranian Jewish identity. This also helps to explain the number of Iranian Jews emigrating to Israel in the late 1940s and early 1950s compared to the numbers in the 1960s and 1970s. See *ibid.*, 63–91.

¹² Amnon Netzer, "Kalimi," in *Jewish Communities of Iran: Entries on Judeo-Persian Communities Published by the Encyclopedia Iranica*, ed. Houman Sarshar (New York: Encyclopedia Iranica Foundation, 2011), 376–77. Also see the thoughtful reflection of Lea Danialy, a member of the Isfahan Jewish community and an editor of and contributor to *Ofeq Bina* and the digital research platform 7dorim.com, on the concept of Kalimi; "Shāhīn the Kalīmī and his Torah as a Mirror for Jewish-Iranian culture," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* (2022), doi: 10.1080/14725886.2022.2090235.

¹³ The number of Jews living in Iran is highly contested. The official census number is around 9,700 Jews; https://www.amar.org.ir/Portals/0/census/1395/results/ch_nsonvm_95.pdf. However, the official statistical bureau has a long history of undercounting religious and ethnic minorities. In a recent interview, the chief rabbi of Iran, Yehuda Garami, estimated that there are 20 to 25 thousand Jews living in Iran; "Chief Rabbi of Iran: Israel Does Not Represent Judaism," *al-Monitor*, 18 June 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/06/israel-iran-qasem-soleimani-jewish-community-coronavirus.html>.

¹⁴ Arguably, the Jewish population in Lebanon also increased after 1948 by a few thousand, mostly Jews from Syria. For the Lebanese case, see Schulze, *Jews of Lebanon*, 87–96; on Iraqi-Jewish immigration to Iran, see Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion*, 32–39.

strikes and targeted assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists, and the rhetoric of “regime change”—has impeded open public discussion and dispassionate academic work on Iran, particularly with regard to the affairs and status of minorities.¹⁵

Ever since the Islamic Revolution, scholars and commentators have viewed Iranian Jews as existing in a state of *taqiya* (dissimulation), the Shi'i practice that allows the believer to hide one's true faith to protect oneself from persecution.¹⁶ Anything Iranian Jews might say pertaining to living in the Islamic Republic is assumed to have been articulated from this cloaked position and so would never truly express their heartfelt thoughts or deeds.¹⁷

Another concept that is taken from the Shi'i religious vocabulary that appears frequently in writings about the “nature” of the relationship between Shi'a and Jews is *najes* (impure), for example, the belief that by a single touch a non-Muslim (or even Sunni in a Shi'a society) can make food or even a whole street impure. This condition dictates another set of limitations and additional burdens for Jews living in Muslim lands. In her inaugural speech (April 21, 2021), the newly elected member of the Knesset from the Likud Party, Galit Distal Atbaryan, talked about her childhood memories of her Iranian-born parents telling her about their trauma of being treated as *najes* in the bazaar in Isfahan. Atbaryan's parents left Iran at the beginning of the most profound development and upward mobility trajectory that Jews have experienced in Iran, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and after. Even then cultural and religious norms were not applied, practiced, or enforced equally across the country.¹⁸

Concepts such as *taqiya*, *dhimmi*, and *najes* have special designation in the line connecting scholarship, public discourse, and policymaking. As Daniel Schroeter aptly asserted: “Although *dhimmi* denotes a legal status that applies to non-Muslim ‘people of the book’ generally, especially Christians, who were much more numerous in the Islamic world than Jews, scholars and activists who write on anti-Semitism without expertise on Islam and the Middle East use the term as an alarm bell regarding the dangers of Islam to the Jews.”¹⁹

In the context of Iranian Jews, the seminal work that served the scholarly community and the general public was Habib Levy's *Comprehensive History of the Jews of Iran: The Outset of the Diaspora* (in Persian, *Tarikh-i Yahud-i Iran*).²⁰ Levy's own biography is important in the context of this book. He was one of the leaders of the Iranian Jewish community: a prominent philanthropist, industrialist, and Zionist organizer and activist. Levy was never trained as a

¹⁵ Katajun Amirpur, “Iran's Policy towards Jewish Iranians and the State of Israel: Is the Present Iranian State Islamofascist?” *Die Welt Des Islams* 52, no. 3/4 (2012): 370–99; Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 153–61.

¹⁶ Louis Medoff, “*Taqiya*, i. In Shi'ism,” *Encyclopedia Iranica*, 25 April 2015, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/taqiya-i-shiism>.

¹⁷ See for example this statement in a blog post of Karmel Melamed, a Jewish Iranian journalist who is based in Los Angeles and writes regularly for the *Jewish Journal*, *The Forward*, and the *Times of Israel*: “Yet what both men failed to tell the USA Today reporter and other western journalists are that Jews will say whatever their radical Islamic puppet masters in Tehran tell them to say in order to avoid arrest or other potential calamities brought upon the Jewish community in Iran”; “USA Today's New Report on Iran's Jews Is Inaccurate and Irresponsible,” *Jewish Journal*, 4 September 2018, <https://jewishjournal.com/blogs/238119/usa-todays-new-report-irans-jews-inaccurate-irresponsible>. This sentiment is by no means limited to that space. The idea of practicing *taqiya*, or self-censorship, to protect the community's safety appears in David Menashri, “The Jews in Iran: Between the Shah and Khomeini,” in *Anti-Semitism in Times of Crisis*, ed. Sander Gilman (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 363–69. The Islamic Republic also practices *taqiya* by using the superficial differentiation between Zionism and Judaism to conceal its anti-Semitism and shield itself from criticism by the West. See Soli Shahvar, “The Islamic Regime in Iran and Its Attitude towards the Jews: The Religious and Political Dimensions,” *Immigrants & Minorities* 27, no. 1 (2009): 104.

¹⁸ See Atbaryan's speech; <https://www.knesset.tv/parliament/1307/33726>. For more on the changing social and religious conditions from the 19th century onward and the practice of religious impurity, see Daniel Tsadik, *Between Foreigners and Shi'is: Nineteenth-Century Iran and Its Jewish Minority* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

¹⁹ Daniel J. Schroeter, “‘Islamic Anti-Semitism’ in Historical Discourse,” *American Historical Review* 123, no. 4 (2018): 1180.

²⁰ Habib Levy, *Comprehensive History of the Jews of Iran: The Outset of the Diaspora* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 1999). The original Persian edition is Habib Lavi, *Tarikh-i Yahud-i Iran* (Tehran: Barukhim, 1956).

historian, and his engagement with writing Jewish history started in his youth when he read Heinrich Graetz's *The History of the Jews*.²¹ Although Levy's work carries some important documentation, community narratives, and oral history, it lacks any historical methodology or theory, which proves to be highly problematic when trying to present a narrative of 2700 years.²² Originally written in Persian and published in three volumes between 1957 and 1961, it recounted the history of Iranian Jews from the Babylonian exile until 1961 (the English-language edition extends the narrative to the 1979 revolution with very few historical additions to the original text). Jewish history is recounted through a lens of communal riots and anti-Jewish decrees.

In the past couple of decades, Middle East studies scholars have published myriad books that have revisited Jewish histories employing new integrative methodologies and perspectives. Orit Bashkin has described this trend as "the Middle Eastern Shift" in Jewish studies.²³ It is an apt conceptualization to describe a new historiographical approach that focuses on conditions that enabled Jewish communities to integrate into the national and imperial frameworks of modern MENA societies rather than through the fundamental lens of purported ancient Jewish-Muslim rivalry. Following the appearance of this scholarship, our understanding of Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, the Ottoman Empire, and even Mandatory Palestine and early statehood Israel has fundamentally changed.²⁴

For various reasons that are connected to the nature of Iranian studies and Jewish studies, these otherwise field-wide methodological changes did not occur in studies of Iranian Jewish communities. Instead, this scholarship preserved what Hamid Dabashi has called "the horrid and persistent anti-Jewish trait endemic in Iranian popular culture and even in Persian literature," while overlooking additional and sometimes contradictory phenomena.²⁵ In doing so, it continued to produce the same type of superficial scholarship that permits Iranian Jews only a nominal existence as silent *dhimmis*, without agency.²⁶

Jewish journalism in Iran provides a neglected gateway to analysis of the developments and transformations that the Jewish communities experienced across the 20th and 21st centuries. I draw on two main publications. The first, *Tamuz* (named after the Hebrew month of July), was published from 1979 to 1986 by the Association of Jewish Iranian Intellectuals (AJII; Jami'a-i Rawshanfikran-i Kalimi-yi Iran). The leadership of AJII was the de facto leadership of the Jewish community from March 1978 onward.²⁷ The second, *Ofeq Bina* (in Hebrew, Horizons of Wisdom) has appeared regularly since 1999 and continues to serve as the official

²¹ Habib Levi, *Khatirat-i Man* (Beverly Hills, CA: Habib Levy Cultural and Educational Foundation, 2002), 198. See the Graetz volume that inspired Levy; Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1891).

²² For more critical engagement with Levy's work, see Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion*, 6–14.

²³ Orit Bashkin, "The Middle Eastern Shift and Provincializing Zionism," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 3 (2014): 577–80.

²⁴ See for example, Beinun, *Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry*; Michelle U. Campos, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth-Century Palestine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); Bashkin, *New Babylonians*; Aomar Boum, *Memories of Absence: How Muslims Remember Jews in Morocco* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); Julia Phillips Cohen, *Becoming Ottomans: Sephardi Jews and Imperial Citizenship in the Modern Era* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014); Stein, *Saharan Jews*; Orit Bashkin, *Impossible Exodus: Iraqi Jews in Israel* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017); Alma Rachel Heckman, "Jewish Radicals of Morocco: Case Study for a New Historiography," *Jewish Social Studies* 23, no. 3 (2018): 67–100; and Heckman, *Sultan's Communists*.

²⁵ Hamid Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted* (New York: New Press, 2007), 150–51.

²⁶ In recent years, several edited volumes dedicated to Iranian Jewish history have been published. The articles included vary in their depth, content, and approach to Jewish history. Some uncritically accept the paradigm of "passive community" without any attempt to challenge it, while others find new ways to approach methodological and empirical questions in Iranian Jewish history and culture. For example, see Houman M. Sarshar, ed., *The Jews of Iran: The History, Religion, and Culture of a Community in the Islamic World* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014); and Aaron J. Koller and Daniel Tsadik, eds., *Iran, Israel, and the Jews: Symbiosis and Conflict from the Achaemenids to the Islamic Republic* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019).

²⁷ Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion*, 95–101.

publication of the Jewish community in Iran. This research focuses on those printed publications, and they provide a certain vantage point on the sectors in the community that are in direct conversation with the state. This can limit as much as it reveals. On the one hand, these resources may operate under tight constraints and navigate pressures from the community, regime, and general society; on the other, dissenting voices sound louder in this context.

Prior to the 1979 revolution, even as Iran's Jewish population of 80,000 to 100,000 inhabitants remained externally unaltered, internally it experienced profound transformations due to the emigration of lower-income Jews to Israel in the late 1940s and early 1950s, as well as the rapid urbanization and economic integration of the Jewish middle class. Indeed, Israel played an oversized role in shaping how Iran's Jewish communities were perceived both inside and outside the Middle East. Interestingly, these transformations share profound resemblance to what the Christian Armenians in Iran experienced in the same period.²⁸ Until the shah's overthrow, because of the tight-knit alliance between the two countries, Israel portrayed Iran as a modern society in which Jewish communities could thrive, just like any other modern Western society. After the revolution Jewish existence in Iran became almost an oxymoron, according to the Israeli narrative.²⁹

During the first years of statehood, Israel's emissaries worked relentlessly, with varying levels of success, to register Jews for *aliya* (immigration to Israel). Most of the Jews who immigrated from 1948 to 1953 were among the poorest of the Iranian Jewish communities and from the geographical and social periphery of Iran.³⁰ Shortly thereafter, partially thanks to this emigration, but also to wider social, cultural, and economic transformations—urbanization, the emergence of a new middle class and bourgeoisie, industrialization, and changes in commerce and bureaucracy—Iranian Jews experienced an unprecedented elevation of their status. Reflecting this change, Yossef Ness, the director of the Aliya Department in Tehran, wrote in a 1961 telegram to the chair of the Organization Department of the Jewish Agency, Tzvi Luria, “We have to take into consideration that under normal political conditions in this country, many years will pass before the majority of Jews will immigrate to Israel. In that sense, Persia is not different from other Western countries whose Jews would rather stay in the diaspora.”³¹

Between 1948 and 1961, Israel's view shifted from one in which the Jewish state was “rescuing” the Iranian Jews to a perception of Iran as similar to other Western industrial welfare states. Accordingly, shortly thereafter, the Jewish Agency decided to cease its operation of encouraging Jews to immigrate to Israel. In the late 1970s, however, as violent demonstrations presaged the revolution that would overthrow Mohammad Reza Shah, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin (r. 1977–83) deployed Moshe Katsav, a young member of the Knesset and a native of Iran (and future president of Israel) on a fact-finding mission to Iran. Stunning Katsav and members of Begin's government, who began evoking 1930s Germany, the Iranian Jews did not view the revolutionary events as reason for Israel, or

²⁸ Many of the social and cultural developments that shaped the Jewish experience in Iran, especially under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, were shared by the Armenians, including climbing the social ladder, sympathies with and overrepresentation in the communist Tudeh Party, sociocultural and socioreligious ostracism and impurity issues, increased visibility in the public sphere, sympathies with the revolution in the late 1970s, and the handling of the communities after the revolution. Both communities also had to navigate between their Iranian belonging and regional forces that were in conflict with Iran (or other ethnic groups within Iran, such as Azerbaijanis), be it Israel, Armenia, or the Soviet Union. See James Barry, *Armenian Christians in Iran: Ethnicity, Religion, and Identity in the Islamic Republic* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

²⁹ For analysis of this, see Haggai Ram, *Li-Kero Iran Be-Yisrael: Ha-'atsmi Veha-Ahar, Dat u-Modernityut* (Jerusalem: Hotsa'at ha-Kibuts ha-Me'uhad, 2006), 14–41; and Haggai Ram, *Iranophobia: The Logic of an Israeli Obsession* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

³⁰ Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion*, 63–83.

³¹ Yossef Ness, director of the Aliyah Department in Tehran, to Tzvi Luria, chair of the Organization Department, Jewish Agency, 30 July 1961, CZA S/64/194/1106.

anyone else, to rescue them. So, even as public discourse in Israel and Katsav, in his many reports from Iran, sought to depict the situation in Iran as paralleling that of 1930s Germany, Iranian Jews refused to play the expected role of victim.³²

Even before Ruhollah Khomeini's return to Iran in February 1979, the Israeli press and leadership invoked the loaded terminology of European Jewish history. Israeli media reported on "fears of the establishment of concentration camps for Jews in Iran."³³ Prime Minister Begin regularly used Holocaust analogies.³⁴ With Holocaust memory now playing such a profound role in Israeli society, the events in Iran—depicted in Holocaust-related jargon—allowed bringing current day Mizrahi communities into the folds of the Holocaust story.³⁵

In February 1980, Israeli president Itzhak Navon hosted a discussion on the Jews of Iran. Professor Amnon Netzer, a noted scholar of Iranian studies in Israel, wrote in preparation for this discussion that:

Only in late 1978 and early 1979 did we in Israel and around the world get the impression that Iran's Jewry is in grave danger. Some even predicted horrific occurrences that included extermination camps for the Jews of Iran. Now, a year after the revolution, there are many question marks. What is the nature of the current regime in Iran? Why in fact was there no mass exodus of Jews while they were free to leave the country? Why did the majority of those who left Iran (between 20,000-30,000) choose not to make *aliya* to Israel? We are astounded by the phenomenon that hundreds of Jews (if not more than that) leave Iran every month and then return to Iran, without any interruption on behalf of Iran's government.³⁶

Yet again, we see that experts could not explain the unpredictable (and as it was perceived, unreasonable) behavior of Jews who could leave Iran, who chose not to immigrate to Israel, and moreover who could reenter Iran, all while the revolutionary government was fully aware of their movements and did nothing to stop it.

³² Yossef Vaksman, "HK Katsav Yotze li-Mesimat Hatzala be-Iran," *Maariv*, 12 December 1978, 4; Yossef Vaksman, "Iyumim al Yehudei Iran: Bekhol Et Darush Hitler Sheyeka' et ha-Yehudim," *Maariv*, 25 January 1979, 2. Additionally, see interviews with Moshe Katsav upon his return on 24 December 1978, in which he mentions the opposition of the community leadership to his visit (as opposed to the warm welcome he received from members of the community); Ezra Yanov, "Tziyoni Melokhlakh, Matzatzta et Dameinu Bekarov Na'ase Mimkha Ktitzot," *Maariv*, 24 December 1978, 3. In an op-ed written by Katsav himself after the shah's departure from Iran, he blames Iranian Jews for not wanting to leave the country, blames Israel and the Zionist establishment for neglecting proper Zionist education in Iran and favoring short-term profits and relations with the shah despite seeing that his days in power were numbered, and blames the Aliyah emissaries for accepting "no" from Iranian Jews in answer to pleading for immigration to Israel; Moshe Katsav, "Yahadut Iran: Shnei Tzidei ha-Matbe'a," *Maariv*, 26 January 1979, 21, 37.

³³ Tova Tzimuki, "Hashashot me-Hakamat Mahanot Rikuz la-Yehudim be-Iran," *Davar*, 22 January 1979, 1.

³⁴ This phenomenon of "Shoah-ization" or "Europeanization" of Jewish history in the Middle East is evident in almost every major text from the 1940s through the end of the century. Events of unrest or riots were called "pogroms," *mahallah* (a perfectly neutral name in Persian for the Jewish quarter or neighborhood) became "ghetto," and leaders such as Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser or Mahmud Ahmadinejad, who opposed or led a fight against Israel, were immediately crowned as Hitler's successors. See Ella Shohat, "Mizrahim Be-Israel: Ha-Tziyonot mi-Nekudat Mabatam shel Korbanoteiha Ha-Yehudim," in *Zichronot Asoorim: Likrat Mahshava Rav Tarbutit* (Tel Aviv: Keshet Ha-Mizrah, 2001), 150–55.

³⁵ For Begin's obsession with the Holocaust, see Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 396–404. Hanna Yablonka, in *Harhek Meha-Mesilah: Ha-Mizrahim Yeha-Sho'ah* (Tel-Aviv: Yedi'ot Aharonot, 2008), discusses the role of the narratives of the Holocaust in socialization projects in Israel. I believe that the opportunity presented by the revolution in Iran for the use of Holocaust imagery took the Israeli public, journalists, and Begin by surprise, and that this is when obsession with this imagery became useful.

³⁶ Amnon Netzer, "Yahadut Iran: Kavim Klaliyim le-Hatzaat Diyun be-Hug Beit ha-Nasi," 17 February 1980, to President Itzhak Navon and the Central Organization of Iranian Immigrants in Israel, Israel State Archives, N 7/294.

The Politicization of Iranian Jews (1941–1979)

Missing from the Israeli story was a realization that Jews in Iran had not been mere bystanders or passive participants in Iranian society and politics. Jewish activism and participation in leftist parties had been prevalent in Iran since 1941, to the extent that they were over-represented in some circles; even the British characterized the communist Tudeh party as one comprised of “Armenians, Jews, and Caucasian émigrés.”³⁷ Many such politically active Jews (not the majority by any stretch of the word, but enough to constitute a visible minority) remained active in the 1970s leading up to the revolution. I would argue that this political involvement, be it on the side of the Tudeh, other revolutionary parties, or even pro-Shah or Iranian Zionist parties, strengthened their ties and commitment to the country, culture, and society. The Iranian Zionist activism reflected Zionism as a particular cultural movement with roots in Iranian Jewish society.

At the time, the Tudeh was one of the most popular political parties among all Iranians, in terms of membership and sympathizers.³⁸ In the 1950s several Jewish newspapers and publications promoted the party’s political line, and they increasingly became more important and more popular. Newspapers like *Nissan* (named after the Hebrew month of April) and *Bani-Adam* (Human Beings; there are many cultural references to *Bani Adam* in Persian classic poetry) supported and facilitated the formation of Jewish political activism. Their work cultivated a national consciousness that exceeded the boundaries of the Jewish community alone. After 1953, Jews and Armenians continued to be disproportionately overrepresented in various underground political parties and anti-Shah circles.³⁹ On par with their political activism during the Pahlavi period, Jews were part of 1970s revolutionary movement groups in addition to the Tudeh, such as student organizations and the Association of Jewish Iranian Intellectuals. They, too, took to the streets and participated in political demonstrations supporting a wide variety of revolutionary movements.

It is difficult to quantify the extent of Jewish participation in the revolutionary movement, but sources suggest that it was not inconsequential. In March 1978, nine months before the shah left Iran, Jewish radicals, some of whom were socialists and republicans, won the elections for the leadership of the central organization of the Jewish communities, defeating the old guard establishment that was identified closely with the shah and his alliance with Israel.⁴⁰ These activists formed the aforementioned AJII. Later in 1978, particularly in September and December when the demonstrations grew larger and more frequent, there are multiple reports of thousands of Jewish protestors marching in Tehran, and the Jewish hospital in the city operated rescue teams together with the leadership of the revolutionary movement.⁴¹ It should be noted that from that moment on there were no official voices in the community in support of Zionism. There were myriad motivations and reasons for Jews (and non-Jews) to support the revolution, some more prosaic than others. In her memoir, Roya Hakakian provides a glimpse into how a Jewish teenage girl from a middle-class family in Tehran understood the revolution swirling around her: “Not to those screaming strangers

³⁷ Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 452. Abrahamian mentions this reputation because the party’s opponents cited it to discredit the organization.

³⁸ Sephr Zabih, *The Communist Movement in Iran* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1966), 71–208; Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 281–418; Maziar Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999), 1–25.

³⁹ Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion*, 40–62.

⁴⁰ Menashri, “Jews in Iran,” 360; Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion*, 98. For more on the relations between the shah and Israel, see Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008). For accounts of Israeli officials in Iran during the Pahlavi period, see Hayim Tsadok, *Yahadut Iran bi-Tekufat ha-Shoshelet ha-Pahlavit: Yehude Iran ve-Erets Yisrael (1935–1978)* (Tel Aviv: Mevatseg, 1991); and Meir Ezri, *Mi Va-Khem Mi-Kol 'Amo* (Or Yehuda, Israel: Sifriyat Ma'ariv, 2001).

⁴¹ Amnon Netzer, *Yehudei Iran Be'yameinu* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1981), 22; Lior Sternfeld, “The Revolution’s Forgotten Sons and Daughters: The Jewish Community in Tehran during the 1979 Revolution,” *Iranian Studies*, 47, no. 6 (2014): 857–69.

in the car, but to the streets, to their rapturous cascade that beckoned me with undeniable clarity, I belonged. To the revolution I belonged. To the rage that unlike me had broken free. It would guide me as no one else could, raise me as no one else knew how. And to be its daughter, I would emulate it in any way I could.”⁴²

Following the revolution’s victory and the early days of the republic, Jews—just like non-Jews—tried to navigate their way in the rapidly changing society. In the months immediately following the revolution, chaos reigned in both the government and in the streets. The revolutionary courts executed hundreds of the shah’s loyalists, power struggles ensued between the competing revolutionary movements, and there was a broad attempt to erase any evidence of the former Pahlavi domestic and foreign policies. One of the highest profile trials and executions was that of the industrialist, philanthropist, and Jewish community leader, Habib Elghanian, on 9 May 1979. Given the clearly fabricated charges of being a “friend of God’s enemies, spying for Israel, and spreading corruption on earth,” Iranian Jews feared that if the new government executed Elghanian no Jews would be immune from such treatment.⁴³ Shortly afterward, the Iranian Jewish leader Hakham Shofet led a small delegation to Qom to meet with Ayatollah Khomeini to seek clarification. The meeting helped to allay the Jewish community’s concerns. In his proclamation, Khomeini acknowledged the deep roots of the Jewish communities in Iran, underscored the elements of monotheism present in both Judaism and Islam, and distinguished between Zionism and Judaism: “We know that the Iranian Jews are not Zionist. We [and the Jews] together are against Zionism. . . . They [the Zionists] are not Jews! They are politicians that claim to work in the name of Judaism, but they hate Jews. . . . The Jews, as the other communities, are part of Iran, and Islam treats them all fairly.”⁴⁴

At the same time, this societal chaos produced euphoric dreams for the postrevolutionary republic. In less than two years, from February 1979 to summer 1980, Iran witnessed its broadest political participation and freedom of the press that resulted in hundreds of new publications, which in turn helped to inform and shape public opinion. Such participation and euphoria were enjoyed by all the religious minorities, including the Jews.

The Jewish community’s leadership now had direct relations with the revolutionary leaders, and they were given a place to represent the Jews and other religious minorities in shaping the character of the new republic. One of its community’s leaders, ‘Aziz Daneshrad, an ex-Tudeh activist, was elected to represent the Jews in the Constitutional Experts Council (Majlis Khobrigan-i Qanun-i Asasi). The council’s main role was to write the republic’s new constitution and bring it forth for referendum.⁴⁵ At the same time that news reports in Israel and around the world claimed that Iran was building extermination camps for Iranian Jews, Daneshrad as a sitting member of the council raised the idea of revoking the reserved seat for the religious minorities, allowing minority candidates to compete in the general party lists. To his disappointment, the measure was not approved.

⁴² Roya Hakakian, *Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004), 124.

⁴³ See the chapter on Habib Elghanian in Abbas Milani, *Eminent Persians: The Men and Women Who Made Modern Iran, 1941–1979*, 2 vols. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 615–21.

⁴⁴ “Imam: Hisab-i Jami’ah-i Yahud Ghayr Az Jami’ah-i Sahyunist Ast,” *Ittila’at*, 14 May 1979. For more on that visit to Qom, see Roya Hakakian, “The Secret Jewish Visit in 1979 to the Ayatollah, Which Saved Iran’s Jews,” *Tablet Magazine*, 3 December 2014, <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/187519/how-iran-kept-its-jews>; and Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion*, 112–15.

⁴⁵ Daneshrad was known among the non-Jewish public as well. During the shah’s regime he was in prison for his political activism. He was one of the founders of the AJII. See more on the members of the council and protocols of their meetings: <http://www.majleskhobregan.ir/fa/tadvinGhanon.html>.



Figure 1. The front page of Tamuz, 19 November 1981 (28 Aban 1360). In the photo, the newly elected president (today's Supreme Leader) Hojjat al-Islam 'Ali Khamenei responds to the Association of Jewish Iranian Intellectuals.

The Public Sphere and Jewish Press in Postrevolutionary Iran

Daneshrad, for his part, did share his insights from the council's discussions and debates in *Tamuz*, the official publication of the AJII. *Tamuz* resembled previous generations of leftist Jewish publications in content and format. In its reporting, it promoted support for the revolution and the notion that being revolutionary was essentially Jewish. It also featured close analysis of the Jewish communities of Iran, Israel, and the rest of the world, while contextualizing this analysis to current events in Iran, and even served as a platform for communication between the republic's leadership and the Jewish population (Fig. 1). Daneshrad

presented the AJII's position, and by proxy, the religious minority communities' (Jewish, Christian, and Zoroastrian) position on the proposed constitution:

In article 50 of the constitution, it is written that Iranian Zoroastrians and Jews will have one representative elected, and Christians will elect two representatives. Such a proposition is drawn from years of tyranny and strangulation. Our country's strength and character are dependent upon the coexistence of the religious minorities and the national majority. . . . AJII believes that every Iranian, no matter their religion, ethnicity, or race, must have the right to vote. This right must be protected and implemented by a mutual understanding and respect between all ethnic groups and religious followers in the country.⁴⁶

Daneshrad did not limit himself to dealing with Jewish or minorities affairs. He was active on economic and social issues, pronouncing the state's responsibility to workers and the poor. It was during the council's debate on Article 14 of the constitution—the article that officially recognizes Iran's religious minorities—that he proved how crucial his mission of representing minority rights was at this stage. During the debate, the deputy from Baluchistan, Molavi 'Abdol-'Aziz, argued against Iran's decision to recognize the official religions of Israel and America ('Abdol-'Aziz spoke about countries that were nominally enemies of Iran) while not recognizing his religion, Sunni Islam. Ayatollah Beheshti, the chair of this session, reminded council members that religious minorities had always been a part of Iranian society and allowed Daneshrad to respond. Daneshrad's response was emotional and agitated. He exclaimed: "I am loyal to this country, I was born Iranian, my ancestors have been in Iran for 2700 years, and I will be buried in Iran." He then asserted that "the Israeli government is a secularist government, and its foundation is not based on religion but on the politics of usurpation which is hated by all believing Jews."⁴⁷ The constitution was amended several times by referendum, with Iranian Jews' place among other recognized minorities preserved. Their representation in the Majlis was also safeguarded. The year immediately following the revolution brought the most horrific revolutionary developments, such as the revolutionary trials and mass executions, assassinations, and general political instability.⁴⁸ At the same time, we should recall the feeling of institutional utopian chaos that allowed Iranians—Shi'i Muslims and minorities—to exercise their imaginations, hopes, and fears of what the post-revolutionary republic was going to look like. It also cemented the notion that they had a say in the shaping of their future, based on past and present experiences. The next challenge would be how to most strategically redefine their Jewish and Iranian identities within the Islamic Republic.

Navigating the Maze of Identities: Being Jewish and Iranian in the Islamic Republic

Once the Islamic Republic was formalized in 1979/80, the state forced all its subjects to redefine the boundaries of their religious identity, whether they were Muslim or a recognized religious minority. Unrecognized minorities, such as the Baha'i, were denied any option for recognition within the framework of the Islamic Republic, and would be persecuted

⁴⁶ It became Article 64 of the constitution in its final form. This proposal was rejected by Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan and the first president of the republic, Abulhassan Bani-Sadr, whose argument was that if minorities gave up their reserved seat, they would not be represented at all. 'Aziz Daneshrad, "Nazariyat-i Jami'iah Rawshanfikran Yahudi Iran Dar Barayi Qanun-i Asasi," *Tamuz*, 4 July 1979.

⁴⁷ *Surat-i Mashruh-i Muzakirat-i Majlis-i Barrasi-i Nihayii Qanun-i Asasi-yi Jomhuri-yi Islami-i Iran*, 8th session, 22 August 1979/31 Mordad 1358 (Tehran: Idarah-yi Kul Amurfarhangi va Ravabit Amumi Majlis-i Shura-yi Islami, 1364/1985), 183–87.

⁴⁸ For example, see Ervand Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 124–76.

for their religious affiliation.⁴⁹ Muslims had to find their place on a spectrum of acceptable positions within Islam, as interpreted by Iran's religious leadership, even as the political winds shifted between inclusivity and exclusivity. Recognized minorities faced multiple challenges, even related to practicing their religion and their political and religious identification.⁵⁰ Categorized as different due to religious affiliation, Iranian national identity was the only acceptable path into the new society.

In the early 1980s, the Iranian Jewish leadership defined its political and national belonging on two levels. First, they distanced themselves completely from any identification with Israel, while stressing the long-time position of the Jewish community's leaders against Zionism. Then, with the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq war in September 1980, they showed unequivocal support for the war effort. To underscore their support, community leaders worked through synagogues and other social establishments to encourage enlistment in the Iranian army.⁵¹ They presented the act of volunteering as an opportunity to make a blood covenant with Iran's Muslim majority. *Tamuz*, for example, published an article paralleling the actions of young Jewish activists during the revolution to those of joining the military efforts in defending the homeland: “Jewish Iranian youth, before and after 22 Bahman 1357 [February 11, 1979], joined their [Muslim] compatriots in the struggle against the Shah's regime, and in this way dedicated martyrs to the revolution [*Shohada-yi taqdim beh enqelab namudand*]. After the victory of the Islamic revolution and the stabilizing of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Jewish youth have been part of every arena from participation in the Construction Jihad [*Jihad Sazendagi*] to helping our brothers and sisters with the support they needed on the front in the battles against the aggressor regime of Iraq in every place and showed their commitment to the revolution.”⁵²

Tamuz repeatedly published stories on the failures of Zionism and connected Israeli aggression and the banishment of the Palestinians and the Mizrahi Jews to the ideological failure of Zionism. In the 1980s *Tamuz* writers leveled scathing criticisms at Israel for annexing Jerusalem and the Golan Heights and for the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and noted that in 1981, for the first time in Israel's history, more people emigrated from than immigrated to

⁴⁹ See, for example, Reza Afshari, “The Discourse and Practice of Human Rights Violations of Iranian Baha'is in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” in *The Baha'is of Iran: Socio-Historical Studies*, ed. Dominic Parviz Brookshaw and Seena Fazel (London: Routledge, 2008), 232–77.

⁵⁰ Tsadik, in *Between Foreigners and Shi'is* (105–7), writes that in the 1870s “the minister for foreign affairs was delegated the responsibility of addressing issues relating to religious minorities—Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians.” The effect of this move, both domestically and internationally, can be discussed separately.

⁵¹ Hard numbers of Jews in the Iranian army during the war are unavailable, but the estimate is that there were a few thousand over the eight years. The contribution of Jews and other minorities is acknowledged on a huge mural in a central location in Tehran, at the junction of Vali-Asr and Mirdamad streets. In addition, in 2011 the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance published a “Memorial Book for the Sacrifice of Our Compatriots: The Christians, Zoroastrians, and Jews,” which celebrates their support and participation, and in the Jewish case the outstanding contribution of the Jewish Sapir Hospital and the Jewish physicians on the front. In December 2014 the government unveiled a monument commemorating the fallen Jewish soldiers from the war, and in his recently published memoir Harun Yeshayaee dedicates a whole chapter to the Jewish community during the Iran–Iraq war. He writes that the contribution of the Armenians was greater, because of their greater numbers and ability to render technological and logistical experience, but the Jewish contribution was significant in the medical fields. See Vizarat-i Farhang va Irshad Islami- Dabirkhaneh-yi Shura-yi Hamahangi va Nizarat Bar Amr Tarvij Farhang Isar va Shahadat, *Yadnameh-Yi Hamvatanaan-i Bargozide-Yi Isaargar-i Masihi, Zartushti va Kalimi* (Tehran: Vizarat-i Farhang va Irshad Islami, 1390 [2011–2012]), 47–54; and Harun Yeshayaee, *Guzaresh Yek Duran: Si Sal-i Zandegi Yahudian Irani* (Tehran: Nashr Maharis, 1398 [2019–2020]), 171–80. In the prerevolutionary period, a military service (*sar buzi*) of fourteen to sixteen months was demanded of everyone, but the service could be in one's professional field, such as engineering, medicine, or teaching. After the establishment of the Islamic Republic the period was not initially extended, but as the Iran–Iraq War continued the service requirement rose to about twenty-four months. There was confusion about the place of religious minorities in this order. For more, see Neda Bolourchi, “Overlooked but Not Forgotten: The Jewish Exemption Claim and the Society of Tehran Jews,” *History and Anthropology* (2022): 1–29, doi: 10.1080/02757206.2022.2096022.

⁵² “Nasl-i Javan-i Kalimi-Yi Iran Bidar Shudah Ast,” *Tamuz*, 6 May 1982.

Israel. In fact, some of these migrants who had initially left Iran returned to the war-stricken country.⁵³

In 1986 *Tamuz* ceased publication. Iran entered its last two years of the war with Iraq (1986–88), coped with the death of Khomeini (1989), and struggled with the long process of postwar recovery. In those years, there were a few waves of emigration, mostly of middle-class families, among them many Jews. Aside from the obvious motivations of political instability, postrevolutionary violence, the fears of an unknown future, and the ongoing war with Iraq, we can also read this as an exodus of the shrinking middle class. After eight years of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency (1989–97), Sayyed Mohammad Khatami (r. 1997–2005) was elected on behalf of the reformist camp. His election was characterized by support for minority rights in civil society, discourse on human and civil rights, and attempts to lead policies of internal dialogue in Iran and a dialogue between Iran and the world. Another by-product was the appearance of myriad publications—mostly liberal leaning.⁵⁴ In that spirit, we see the start of the Jewish establishment's new publication in Tehran, *Ofeq Bina*.

Ofeq Bina first appeared in early 1999 as the official newspaper of the Jewish establishment (in its first year it was published under the shorter title *Bina*). In many ways it represents the intellectual reincarnation of previous Jewish Iranian publications. Some editorial board members had been staff members on *Tamuz*. The cover of the first issue of *Ofeq Bina* (March–April 1999/Farvardin 1378) conveyed its founders' intentions. The title *Bina* appears in Persian and Hebrew along with the Hebrew and Persian date and a classic Persian miniature with the word “Bereshit” (Genesis) in Hebrew at the center. At the bottom of the cover page is written: “Religious, Cultural, and News Magazine of the Jewish Association in Tehran” (Nashriyeh dinni-farhangi-khabari argan-i anjoman-i kalimian-i Tihiran; Fig. 2).

The founders of *Ofeq Bina* perceived its role to be educational, but with a political bent. Reflecting the liberalizing trends within Iran, an early editorial explained how they chose the magazine's name.⁵⁵ *Bina* in Hebrew means wisdom and reason, principles the editors hoped to inculcate among readers.⁵⁶ Its educational mission encompassed the Jewish community within the Islamic Republic (political orientation, community and social organizing, national matters); Jewish culture in Iran (history, literature, contemporary culture, Hebrew learning); and Jewish history and culture around the world. In the first issues of *Bina*, readers could engage with a fascinating introductory article about Spinoza's philosophy, an article on the American Jewish violin maestro Yehudi Menuhin, and an article on the famed Yiddish author Sholem Aleichem accompanied by a translation of one of his short stories.⁵⁷

As part of its political project, *Ofeq Bina* published news items and op-eds by the editors, with regular and guest columnists who described existing opportunities for religious minorities to gain influence in Iran's national and local political systems; they presented debates and interviews regarding the constitutionally protected rights of minorities within the framework of an Islamic discourse on human rights.⁵⁸ At the same time, the magazine tried to highlight the Jews as part of Iran's national community. For example, the

⁵³ “Muhajirat Ma'akus Az Israil: Sahyunist'ha Dar Ban-i Bast-i Kamil,” *Tamuz*, 19 November 1981.

⁵⁴ Although the period was characterized by liberalization of the media outlook, newspapers still had to undergo the scrutiny of censorship, and more so when it came to publications of religious minorities.

⁵⁵ For different assessments of Khatami's presidency, see Dad Babak, *Sad ruz ba Khatami* (Tehran: B. Dad, 1999); Arzoo Osanloo, *The Politics of Women's Rights in Iran* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Mahmood Monshipouri, ed., *Inside the Islamic Republic: Social Change in Post-Khomeini Iran* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016); and Blake Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran: Film and Political Change in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

⁵⁶ “Saraghaz,” *Bina* no. 1, March–April 1999 [Farvardin 1999], 3.

⁵⁷ “Nabegheh Musiqi Qarn, Sal-i 2000 Ra Nadid Payan-i Safr Nafdir Yahudi Minuhin,” *Bina* no. 1, March–April 1999/ Farvardin 1378, 9–10; Afshin Tajiyani, “Yadi az Barukh Aspinoza,” *Bina* no. 1, March–April 1999/ Farvardin 1378, 34–36; Hushang Karmeli, “Shalom Aleikhem: Navisandeh-ye Bozorg-i Yahudi keh az Miyan Mardom Bud va Baraye Anha mi Nivasht,” *Bina* no. 3, June–July 1999/Khordad–Tir 1378, 27–29.

⁵⁸ See, for example, “Jame'eh-yi Kalimiyani Iran Dar Intikhabat Shuraha Mushrikat Fa'il Namud,” *Bina* no. 1, March–April 1999/Farvardin 1378, 12; “Hoquq Aqliyat'ha-ye Dinni va Kamisyon Hoquq-i Bashr-i Islami,” *Bina* no.



Figure 2. Cover of *Bina* (March-April 1999/Farvardin 1378).

community establishment published announcements prior to the 22 Bahman celebrations of the 20th anniversary of the revolution.⁵⁹ It was reported that the Jewish team won the national religious minorities' tournaments in soccer, basketball, volleyball, and table

3, June-July 1999/Khordad-Tir 1378, 16; and Basma Ta'ali, "Hoquq Aqliyatha Dar Qanun-i Asasi Jomhuri Islami Iran," *Bina* no. 6, December 1999-January 2000/Adhar va Dey 1378, 38-39.

⁵⁹ The 22nd day in the month of Bahman is one of the most important national days in the Islamic Republic. It corresponds to the Gregorian date of February 11, the date Bakhtiyar's interim government conceded in 1979, and the official victory of the revolution. *Ofeq Bina* reported on the ceremony of "Dahe-ye Fajr" (the ten-day celebration between February 1 and February 11 marking the days from Khomeini's return to the country in 1979 to the victory of the revolution on 22 Bahman).

tennis.⁶⁰ This shows that Jews and other recognized religious minorities held active roles during the national holidays as well, albeit in a place designated for them as recognized religious minorities within the Islamic Republic.

Ofeq Bina also featured essays highlighting Jewish-specific topics. Essays on history and politics encouraged discussions on political identity. Essays on the place of the Jews in Iranian politics, among other religious minorities and in relation to the majority society, helped to broaden the context for their autonomous existence within Iranian society. And of course, featured essays were included on topics that were unique to their history and situation on matters such as Iranian nationalism, Judaism, and Zionism. Over the years, *Ofeq Bina* presented essays such as “Iran and the Question of Palestine,” which discussed at length the complex history of Iranian Jews with the Zionist movement, and “Eretz Yisrael.” In this two-part essay, Harun Yeshayae, a leading Iranian Jewish thinker, discussed the sanctity of that land to the three Abrahamic religions, the challenges that this mutual sanctity raises, and the history of the Zionist movement within imperial institutions, the Alliance Israelite Universelle, the Qajar monarchy’s relations with Europe, and the ongoing relations between Jews and Muslims in Iran from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century and the Balfour Declaration.⁶¹

In the second part of his essay, Yeshayae addressed the stance of Iranian Jews’ on Zionism after the establishment of Israel: “For many years and until today, in terms of shape and substance [read: numbers], the migration of Iranian Jews to Palestine did not satisfy the Zionist authorities.”⁶² The article emphasizes how, despite great efforts and investment, the Jews of Iran did not respond to the call of Zionism as they were expected to do, contrary to the assumption of the Zionist establishment. It is interesting to consider the space that was given to polemic essays that addressed issues related to Zionism. Presumably, Zionism had no foothold among the magazine writers, editor, or readership. It is possible that, in addition to a nod to the potential censor, the staffers were aware of the dangers of guilt by association to Zionism and tried to preempt it by establishing a long record of essays highlighting the profound differences between Judaism and Zionism.

In another essay, the same author discussed “Zionism in Theory and Practice: The Profound Difference between Prophetic Judaism and Political Zionism.” The article explains the rise of Zionism in the context of anti-Semitic persecution in Europe and presents Zionism as a movement of liberation, like many other similar movements of that time. Yeshayae argued that Zionism did not have an inherent evil core (although this was certainly a mainstream view of Zionism in the Islamic Republic), but took Jewish symbols and filled them with a different substance, a political rather than religious meaning.

Side by side with its efforts to differentiate between Judaism and Zionism in Iran and abroad, the community leadership went out of its way to portray Iranian Jews as deeply rooted in their country and as an integral part of Iranian society. The presidency of Khatami provided them with several opportunities to demonstrate their commitment to Iran and its republic. Khatami’s campaign was part of a democratic and popular movement that crossed sectors in Iranian society and mobilized different demographics, especially the younger generations, who had become a major voting bloc.⁶³ His reformist agenda and campaign promises of a “discourse of civilizations” (*Guftegu-yi tamadun’ha*), supporting civil

⁶⁰ “Mosabikat Dahe-ye Fajr Aqliyat’ha-ye Dinni,” *Bina* no. 1, March-April 1999/Farvardin 1378, 11; “Morasem Dahe-ye Fajr Dar Isfahan,” *Bina* no. 1, March-April 1999/Farvardin 1378, 47.

⁶¹ The essay refers to a book that ‘Ali Akbar Vilayeti published a short time earlier, bearing the same title. Yeshayae’s essay, however, is not structured as a review but rather as an accompanying text, and maybe even an introduction to Vilayeti’s book. Harun Yeshayae, “Iran va Mosaeleh Filastin: Qismat-i Avval,” *Bina* no. 4, August-September 1999/Shahrivar 1378, 20–21, 24.

⁶² Harun Yeshayae, “Iran va Mosaeleh Filastin: Qismat-i Duvvum,” *Bina* no. 6, December 1999-January 2000/Adhar va Dey 1378, 35.

⁶³ See Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr, *Democracy in Iran: History and the Quest for Liberty* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 128–45; Said Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran under His Successors* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University

society and an interreligious dialogue, raised hopes among minorities of gaining more social and political rights.⁶⁴ It is no wonder, then, that *Ofeq Bina* started to publish during this period. The Iranian cultural and civil establishment was part of this new spirit and did not wait for direction. Nor did its leaders need reminders of Khomeini's promise that minorities, as a vital part of the nation-state, would be protected; in fact, the government began implementing some of these core principles. In 1999, as part of the prestigious Fajr Film Festival marking the 20th anniversary of the revolution, Harun Yeshayae received a lifetime achievement award for his decades-long work as a film producer and his influence on Iranian cinema.⁶⁵ Iranian Jews considered the awarding of this prestigious prize to Yeshayae a real breakthrough in community relations with the Iranian government. This is not to suggest that all the barriers were removed. In June 1999, thirteen Jews from Shiraz were arrested for allegedly spying for Israel. Some of them were released immediately afterward, and others were sentenced to short prison terms, with the last prisoner released in 2003.⁶⁶ This story indicated the possibility of unforeseen, random changes in the level of freedoms and personal security Iranian Jews enjoyed, and the fragility that might factor in when they were used, however reluctantly, for geopolitical purposes.

On 11 August 2000, President Khatami met with members of the community. Religious and political leaders were in attendance, as were Jewish students and the Jewish deputy of the Majlis. Khatami expanded on his discourse of civilizations and the partnership of those who believe in one God, and even spoke about Jewish philosophy and the writings of Philo. The important issues, however, Khatami saved for later: "You defended this country shoulder-to-shoulder with Muslims and other citizens during the Sacred Defense [*Difa muqades*, the Iran-Iraq War], and today we can work together in building an independent and proud Iran."⁶⁷ There is great significance in Khatami's recognition of the Jews' participation in the war. Including the Jews in the narrative of the Sacred Defense was a major step in their integration with the greater narrative of the revolution and its subsequent nation-building project. In fact, this war was viewed as the formative experience of the pro-revolution generation. Khatami was also responsible for another major step when, on 8 February 2003, he became the first sitting president since the revolution to conduct an official visit to a synagogue, the Youssef-Abad synagogue in Tehran (Figs. 3, 4).⁶⁸

In 2005, following Khatami's second term, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president. After two presidents and four terms that had perhaps signaled that the revolution was becoming institutionalized and that the reformist camp might be able to counteract the religious conservative establishment, Ahmadinejad represented a counterpoint to the reformist

Press, 2009), 90–111; and Misagh Parsa, *Democracy in Iran: Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 184–200.

⁶⁴ Other than his relationship with the Jewish community, as will be described, Khatami also made the comment that "We are all Zoroastrians," which projected a different treatment of religious minorities by the leadership of the republic. "Hameh ma risheh zaratushti darim [We all have Zoroastrian roots]," YouTube video, Koorosh Moradi, accessed 5 February 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z7wfkBlznfQ>.

⁶⁵ "Rais Anjoman-i Kalimiyān-i Tilhrān beh 'Onvan-i Behtarīn Tahiyeh-yi Konandeh-yi do Dahe-yi Akhir Sinimāi Iran," *Bina* no. 1, March-April 1999/Farvardin 1378, 29.

⁶⁶ The belief is that their arrest, trial, and release were connected to a power struggle between the judicial branch and the conservative religious establishment on one side, and President Khatami and the legislative branch on the other. In the name of a separation of powers Khatami avoided interfering with the court's decision, but public and international pressure brought this story to an end without any of the accused being executed or serving long prison times; AFP, "All Iranian Jews Jailed for Israel Spying Free: Kharazi," World-Wide Religious News, 24 April 2003, <https://wwrn.org/articles/6521>.

⁶⁷ "Didar Namayandigan Jame'eh Kalimyan Iran ba Rais Jomhur," *Ofeq Bina* no. 10, July-September 2000/Tir-Shahrivar 1379, 3.

⁶⁸ "Report of Iranian President's Visit from Youssef-Abad Synagogue, Tehran," Tehran Jewish Committee, 8 February 2003, http://www.iranjewish.com/News_e/22-1.htm.



Figure 3. President Khatami visiting Youssef-Abad synagogue in Tehran, 8 February 2003. Image courtesy of Va'ad HaKehila Li-Yehudei Tehran.



Figure 4. President Khatami being shown the Torah scroll by Iran's chief rabbi, Youssef Kohan Hamedani Z'L, during his 2003 visit to the Youssef-Abad synagogue. Image courtesy of Va'ad HaKehila Li-Yehudei Tehran.

agenda and its platform.⁶⁹ With his confrontational approach, Ahmadinejad tried to position Iran at the frontlines of the struggle against Western and American hegemony. One of the tools he used was the Iranian nuclear project, and by promoting Iran's attempts at nuclearization, he publicly and directly challenged the United States. He reinstated regional and international alliances with countries such as China, Cuba, and Venezuela. These new allies reclaimed their role in Cold War era trade agreements. Last, he challenged the foundations of the liberal post-World War II world order by questioning the authenticity of the Holocaust. Through a series of provocative speeches, an international conference (An International

⁶⁹ This article is too short to include a discussion of the dramatic changes that occurred in the 1990s and 2000s in Iran. The failure of the dialogue of civilizations that stemmed from the "war on terror" and President Bush's declaration that Iran was part of the "axis of evil" prevented any constructive dialogue from taking place. For further reading on the social, economic, and political developments in Iran in that period, see Arjomand, *After Khomeini*; Kevan Harris, *A Social Revolution: Politics and the Welfare State in Iran* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017); and Shahram Khosravi, *Precarious Lives: Waiting and Hope in Iran* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

Convention to the Study of the Holocaust: Points of View from Around the World), and a controversial cartoon competition, he positioned Holocaust denial (in the guise of examining facts) as a major component of his administration's prioritized policy issues. In fact, this policy played a dominant role in meetings with Western statesmen, diplomats, and journalists.⁷⁰

If, as has been argued, Iranian Jews have waited in a taqiya mode, careful to avoid confrontation at all costs, the response of Iran's Jewish leadership countered their prescribed reactive role. Morris Moatamed, then the Jewish deputy in the Majlis, attacked Ahmadinejad in interviews, public letters, and even in the parliament. In an interview with the BBC, Moatamed said that "hosting this convention after [having had] the cartoon contest on the Holocaust puts pressure on Jews around the world and creates the wrong idea about Iran among nations and governments."⁷¹ Moatamed's letter, written in Persian, was even more pointed. Referring to the president and other Holocaust deniers, he said, "They use the cover of anti-Zionism to express their anti-Semitic views and to humiliate the religious and moral values of the Jews."⁷² Harun Yeshayae, who served as the head of the Jewish community, penned a public letter that was published by leading newspapers in Iran, in which he assailed the president and his motives:

How can one forget that the declared main principle of the Nazi party and army was to cleanse Europe of its Jews and its racist theories of fascism? He can read Adolf Hitler's book *Mein Kampf* or the existing speeches of Goebbels and Himmler. How is it possible that there is so much unshakable evidence, documented evidence of the murder of Jews during the Second World War, and instead of accepting this evidence, Ahmadinejad accepts deceitful speeches of a few people? The Holocaust is not a fiction, in the same way that Saddam Hossein's genocide in Halabja is not a fiction, just like the killing of Palestinians and Lebanese in Sabra and Shatila by the murderer [Minister of Defense Ariel] Sharon is not a fiction, and the killing of Muslims in the Balkans and everything that is going on today in Afghanistan, and Iraq, and Sudan, none of it is fiction . . . you need to worry that neo-Nazi European leaders who today burn down houses of black people and raid Muslim neighborhoods, tomorrow may instigate similar treatment of Muslims, comparable to actions that occurred during the Holocaust.⁷³

The Holocaust and its history remained an issue of debate during Ahmadinejad's presidency. During the televised presidential debate in 2009, the leader of the reformist movement, Mir Hossein Moussavi, confronted Ahmadinejad for his Holocaust denial and argued that the president's stance disgraced Iran and created unnecessary friction with Iran's allies.⁷⁴ Harun Yeshayae himself continued to write on this issue for some time, and in 2013 he published an article in *Sharq* (East), the popular newspaper identified with the reformist camp, under the title "Afsaneh ya Vaqiyat" (Myth or Fact). Yeshayae reminded readers that there was no shortage of scholarship and research on the Holocaust or Zionism's manipulation of Holocaust history for its own benefit. He challenged the denialists' assertions that the

⁷⁰ See for example a report of his interview with Steve Inskeep on NPR; Kevin Whitelaw, "Ahmadinejad: Holocaust 'Opinion of Just A Few,'" NPR, 25 September 2009, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=113171156>.

⁷¹ "Iran Defends Holocaust Conference," BBC, 11 December 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6167695.stm

⁷² The complete version was published in the newspaper *Aaftab*. Excerpts were published in "Intiqad-i Moris Moatamed az Azharat Mahmud Ahmadinezhad," *Ofeq Bina* no. 28, January 2006/Dey 1384, 5; and "Namih Intiqadaamiz Rais Anjoman Kalimiyān Tihāran beh Ahmadinezhad," BBC, accessed 10 February 2006, http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/story/2006/02/060210_mf_holocaust.shtml.

⁷³ "Namih Intiqadaamiz Rais Anjoman Kalimiyān Tihāran beh Ahmadinezhad," BBC, accessed 10 February 2006, http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/story/2006/02/060210_mf_holocaust.shtml.

⁷⁴ "Ahmadinejad Accused of Tainting Iran's Image in TV Debate," CNN, accessed 17 May 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/06/04/iran.election.debate/index.html>.

Holocaust was organized by the Jewish lobby in Europe or America. Hitler's death squads operated with the expressed goal of cleansing Europe of its Jewry, he countered, and did not hesitate to kill Jews who had recently converted, or even those who had converted generations earlier. Yeshayae ended the article by removing Zionism and Zionist politics from the narrative. The Nazis "killed the Jews because of their race and religious beliefs, and did not care about the politics of the Jews."⁷⁵

Conclusion: New Narratives

In the years following the 1979 revolution, the overwhelming majority of Iranian Jews left the country. Most of them emigrated to the United States, others to Israel, and still others to Europe and other destinations. The forced overlap between the "Islamic" and "Iranian" parts of national identity made it much harder to stay in Iran as Jews, but not impossible.⁷⁶ Iran's recognized minorities (Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians) were by and large spared the ordeals faced by the Baha'i communities in Iran: persecution, arrests, and even executions; closure of institutions; and reappropriation of property and assets. Yet these recognized minorities understood that if the government could afflict such horrors upon the Baha'is the relative tolerance toward them also might have limits.

Today, forty years after the revolution, we know that no concentration camps were established for the Jews of Iran in the aftermath of the revolution. We know that Jews were not limited in their movements in Iran, nor were they banned from leaving the country (traveling abroad became harder in general, and some Jews faced more hardships than others, but the fact that about 60,000 of them left in the first two decades after the revolution adds much-needed context). Still, official Israeli speakers have characterized the past four decades of the Islamic Republic of Iran as "Germany in 1938."⁷⁷ Public conversations continue to shape academic discourse and scholarship on Iran and Iranian Jews. In a prevailing atmosphere of mutual suspicion, a fabricated story of a group of Iranian exiles in Canada forcing minorities to wear a yellow star was reported as a fait accompli in the Israeli press, generating outrage from voices on both the left and the right of the Israeli political map.⁷⁸ Iranian Jews are not hiding in taqiya mode. In present-day Iran, those who remain speak up against injustices. They express a desire to be part of the Iranian nation and maintain independent positions relative to the Islamic Republic, as well as to Israel and Jewish issues worldwide. The Iranian Jewish response to an ongoing discourse of "rescue" has been far less enthusiastic than expected.⁷⁹ In general, Iranian Jews living in Iran want to remain Jewish and Iranian without compromising any component of their identity.

After Ahmadinejad's two presidential terms, Iranians elected a pragmatist, Hassan Rouhani. Under his leadership (r. 2013–21), Jews experienced a number of political and cultural achievements. In December 2014, the government unveiled a monument with Persian

⁷⁵ Harun Yeshayae, "Afsaneh ya Vaqiyat," *Sharq*, 27 June 2013/19 Tir 1392, 1.

⁷⁶ I want to recommend thinking about these questions alongside the smart analysis Hanan Hammad offers regarding Layla Murad: "Can an Egyptian Be a Single Mother and a Jew?" See Hanan Hammad, *Unknown Past: Layla Murad, the Jewish-Muslim Star of Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022), 223–31.

⁷⁷ Peter Hirschberg, "Netanyahu: It's 1938 and Iran Is Germany; Ahmadinejad Is Preparing Another Holocaust" *Haaretz*, 14 November 2006, <https://www.haaretz.com/2006-11-14/ty-article/netanyahu-its-1938-and-iran-is-germany-ahmadinejad-is-preparing-another-holocaust/0000017f-f08b-df98-a5ff-f3af802c0000>.

⁷⁸ Attila Somfalvi, "Tlai Tshov be-Iran-Zarkor Adom la-Olam," *Ynet*, 20 May 2006, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3252864,00.html>.

⁷⁹ In 2007, Israel raised 1.2 million dollars from Iranian Jewish organizations and communities, mostly in the US, in an attempt to help the 25 thousand Jews who lived in Iran at the time come to Israel. The program promised \$5000 per person (and a whole family could potentially get thousands of dollars to help them rebuild their lives in Israel). The program was promoted in Persian language media and through Iranian synagogues in Israel and the US. See Eli Berdenstein, "Ha-Tokhnit Le-Hashavat Yehudei Iran," *Maariv*, 14 February 2007, <https://www.makorishon.co.il/nrg/online/1/ART1/543/809.html>; and Efrat Zemer, "40 Yehudim Me-Iran Alu La-aretz Betom Mivtzah Hashai." *Maariv*, 25 December 2007, <https://www.makorishon.co.il/nrg/online/1/ART1/675/652.html>.

and Hebrew text that commemorated the Jewish soldiers who sacrificed their lives during the Iran–Iraq war.⁸⁰ In addition, the Majlis passed new laws that corrected prevailing inheritance laws, which prioritized Muslim heirs over their Jewish relatives, and another law that excused Jewish students in public schools from attending classes on Shabbat.⁸¹ Under Rouhani’s tenure, the president and his foreign minister made it a tradition to bless the Iranian Jewish community on their official Twitter accounts on Rosh HaShana.⁸² In one of his many Twitter threads, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif referred to the former president’s Holocaust denial and countered: “Iran never denied the Holocaust. The man who denied the Holocaust is now gone. Happy New Year.”⁸³ Although Zarif meant to draw a line between Ahmadinejad as the most prominent Holocaust denier and the Rouhani administration that he (Zarif) was part of, it is important to note that Holocaust denial remains prevalent in the ranks of the Iranian government. Iran’s Supreme Leader, ‘Ali Khamenei, has himself engaged in Holocaust denial and such references remain on his social media and official website.⁸⁴ Zarif’s point, however, has some merit in that Holocaust denial is not as dominant as in other Middle Eastern societies.⁸⁵ Even during Ahmadinejad’s presidency, state-run TV aired the drama *Zero Degree Turn*, based on the story of Abdol Hossein Sardari, the Iranian diplomat in Nazi-occupied Paris who forged passports for French Jews.⁸⁶

Historiography needs to reflect the many streams of Jewish realities and experiences, especially throughout the turbulent eras of the 20th and 21st centuries. Presenting complex and nuanced narratives should not and can not whitewash the brutality and crimes of the Islamic Republic toward its minorities, and especially the persecution of those of the Bahai’i faith who do not have even the nominal legal protection other minorities enjoy. Rather, these narratives and complex histories help readers see the ways in which Jews in Iran (and other places as well) have sought to overcome legal and social hardships and reach, despite pressure from powerful forces, a well-rounded definition of their ethnic, religious, and national identities. Presenting simplistic narratives, let alone conjoining them

⁸⁰ “Iran Unveils Monument for Fallen Jewish-Iranian Soldiers,” *Times of Israel*, 18 December 2014, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-unveils-monument-for-fallen-jewish-iranian-soldiers>.

⁸¹ Meir Javedanfar, “Rouhani Accommodates Iran’s Jewish Students,” *al-Monitor*, 17 February, 2015, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/iran-hassan-rouhani-iranian-jews.html>; Jan Schneider, “Celebrating Sabbath with Iran’s Jewish Minority,” *Deutsche Welle*, 13 July 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/celebrating-sabbath-with-irans-jewish-minority/a-49543137>.

⁸² Hassan Rouhani (@HassanRouhani), “As the sun is about to set here in #Tehran I wish all Jews, especially Iranian Jews, a blessed Rosh Hashanah,” Twitter, 4 September 2013, <https://twitter.com/hassanrouhani/status/375278962718412800?lang=en>; Hassan Rouhani (@HassanRouhani), “May our shared Abrahamic roots deepen respect & bring peace & mutual understanding. L’Shanah Tovah. #RoshHashanah,” Twitter, 13 September 2015, <https://twitter.com/hassanrouhani/status/643067027389837312?lang=en>; Javad Zarif (@JZarif), “Happy Rosh Hashanah,” Twitter, 4 September 2013, <https://twitter.com/jzarif/status/375617854214660097?lang=en>.

⁸³ Javad Zarif (@JZarif), “@sfpelosi Iran never denied it. The man who was perceived to be denying it is now gone. Happy New Year,” Twitter, 5 September 2013, <https://twitter.com/jzarif/status/375617854214660097?lang=en>.

⁸⁴ In one of the articles on this page Khamenei alludes to the “exaggerated numbers” of Jewish victims in the Holocaust to help with favorable public opinion regarding Israel. “Ravebet-e Nazdik Nazi’ha-ye Alman ba Sahayunistha Baraye Eshghal-e Falastin,” 4 Ordibehesht 1380/24 April 2001, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/newspart-index?tid=3988#40723>.

⁸⁵ See the ADL anti-Semitism index, which found Iran to be the least anti-Semitic country in the Middle East; “ADL Global 100,” Anti-Defamation League, accessed May 17, 2023, <https://global100.adl.org/did-you-know>. In the accompanying report, the ADL found a direct correlation between the existence of Jewish communities in the surveyed country and the level of anti-Semitism. A country in which no Jewish community exists is more likely to be more anti-Semitic than a country where Jews live. Although the results are still terribly worrying (56 percent harbor anti-Semitic views), Iran remains much better than other countries in the region that have no significant Jewish communities. See the BBC report by Hossein Bastani, “Iranians ‘Least Anti-Semitic in Mid-East,’” BBC, 16 May 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27438044>.

⁸⁶ The plot had some serious flaws in its engagement with Zionist history, but it could be argued that it would only be approved for prime time television if it drew a distinction between Jews and Zionists. For more on the story of Sardari in Paris during World War II, see Fariborz Mokhtari, *In the Lion’s Shadow: The Iranian Schindler and His Homeland in the Second World War* (Stroud, UK: History Press, 2011).

into one congruent and self-serving narrative, will be disastrous to our attempts to understand Iran, Jewish history in Iran, and even Jewish history in the contemporary Middle East. Iranian Jews speak and write, and their views, opinions, struggles, and actions can represent their complex experiences of living in Iran. Scholars can understand Iran and Iranian Jews better when they listen to Iranian Jews when they speak and write about their experiences of being Kalimian in Iran.

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