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## In Ahmadinejad's Iran, Jews still find a space

**Some 25,000 Jews still live in Iran and many say that President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's fiery anti-Israeli rhetoric is about politics, not religion.**

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"There have been different voices [coming] from the government, so people felt unsafe," says Mr. Seleh. "But our existence here has always been separate from politics in Iran, and we always had peaceful coexistence with the Muslim community."

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Part of that coexistence has been gratitude for the Dr. Sapir Hospital, a Jewish charity hospital that would have closed years ago, but for subsidies from Jews inside and outside Iran, doctors say.

During the 1979 revolution, the hospital refused to hand over those wounded in clashes with the security forces of the pro-West Shah Reza Pahlavi. Ayatollah Khomeini later sent a personal representative to express his thanks. Ahmadinejad, too, has made a \$27,000 donation.

Still, the Iran-Israel standoff has spilled over into many avenues of life here, with varied results for Iranian Jews.

Strong anti-Zionist undercurrents developed in Iran – and across the Middle East – since Israel's creation in 1948. Those views came to a boil in Tehran after the 1967 war, when Israel crushed Arab foes and occupied the West Bank, Gaza, and Sinai. That war marked a turning point in Iranians' attitudes toward the Jewish state, and sometimes toward Iranian Jews.

During the Asian Cup final in 1968 (which Iran won, 2-1) Iranian fans wore eye patches and chanted abusive slogans, to mock the Israeli defense chief Moshe Dayan. According to published reminiscences, "some homes of Jews in Tehran were attacked and set on fire."

In a match-up between Iran and Israel in the final of the 1974 Asian Games in Tehran, protesters against Israel, members of then-shadowy Islamic groups, prepared to attack the Israeli soccer team.

"Our aim and dream," recalls Ezat Shahi, identified as a "revolutionary fighter" in recently published memoirs, "was to create an event similar to the 1972 Munich Olympics, when the Israeli team was taken hostage by Palestinian gunmen from "Black September," in a standoff that left 11 Israeli athletes dead.

Security measures forced protesters to scale back those plans, but rioting broke out that night.

"On that night, [the authorities] couldn't prevent people from doing what they wanted," says a witness who asked not to be named. "As soon as Israel expanded its power [in the 1967 war] and oppressed the Palestinians, even the liberal part of Iranian society started to call them Zionists." Those flames, encouraged by Islamist groups that would play a key role in the 1979 revolution, helped define the Islamic Republic's opposition to Israel – but not necessarily to Iranian Jews.

"There is always [talk] outside the country that religious minorities are under pressure," says Mr. Motamed. "It is important to say that what people say about minorities is completely wrong,"

"Jews here have great Iranian roots – they love Iran," says chairman Moresadegh. "Personally, I would stay in Iran no matter what. I speak in English, I pray in Hebrew, but my thinking is Persian."

## For one Iranian Olympian, national pride trumped medal dreams

TEHRAN, Iran – Pausing during a workout, Iran's judo ace Arash Miresmaeli speaks of past broken dreams, and his future ones.

"All the hopes and wishes of an athlete are for an Olympic medal," says the lithe double world champion. "Every athlete would withstand the hardest practice, to the point of death, for Olympic gold."

Mr. Miresmaeli paid one price, training hard enough to put himself in medal contention at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens. But one round required competing against an athlete from Israel – a sworn enemy of Iran.

So the Iranian felt he had no choice but to pay another heartbreaking and controversial price: He pulled out of the games, and reset his medal dreams to Beijing in 2008.

That decision cast a stark light on the standoff between Iran and Israel, and how it can color every aspect of potential contact. Even as it was officially lauded in Iran, the decision was decried in Israel and the West as an unsavory mixing of politics and sport.

"When I am sent to another country [to compete], I am a symbol of my people and my nation," says Miresmaeli, his cauliflower ears testament to years in the sport. "When this decision is made, it should be for a nation, not a person ... for the principles of my country."

"Muslims of the world are all brothers. When one brother is oppressed, all Muslims unite to support that person," says Miresmaeli. "This was a good move to show the world there is an oppressed people in Palestine being killed, innocently."

The judo champion returned home a hero, feted by the regime as if he had won gold. Today, a banner over the mats of the national judo team heralds Miresmaeli as an "envoy of the revolution," and shows him receiving an embrace from Iran's supreme religious leader, Ayatollah Sayed Ali Khamenei.

It reads: "This kiss and hundreds of others we offer to you."

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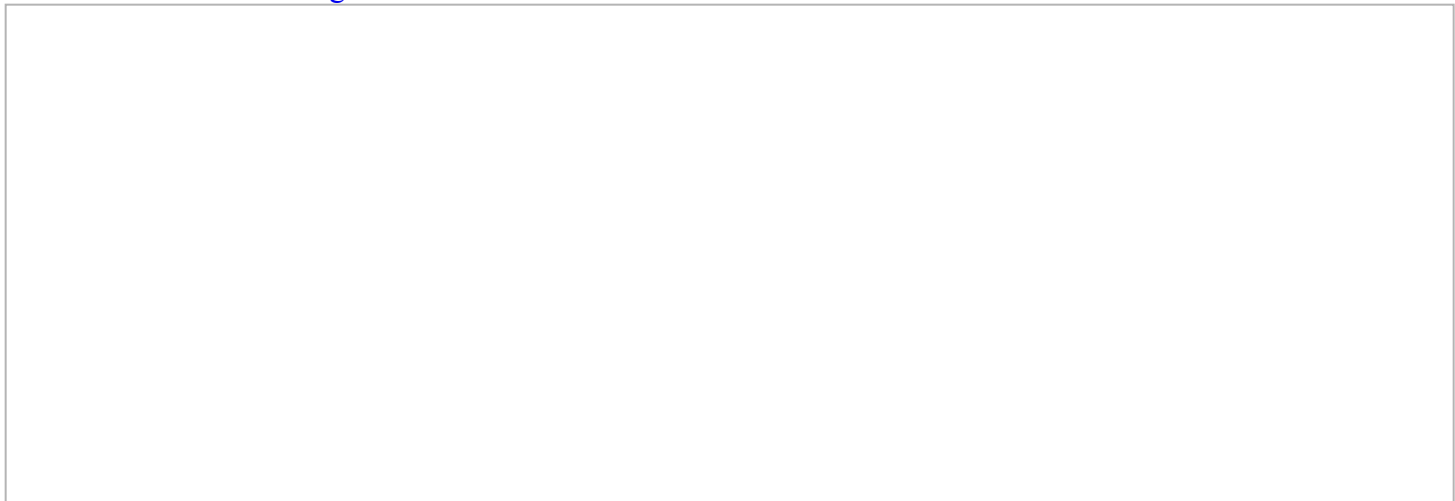
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