

## The Jews of Iran

**1948 Jewish population: 100,000**

**2004: ~20,000-25,000<sup>1</sup>**

The Jewish community of Persia, modern-day [Iran](#), is one of the oldest in the Diaspora, and its historical roots reach back to the 6th century [B.C.E.](#), the time of the [First Temple](#). Their history in the pre-Islamic period is intertwined with that of the [Jews](#) of neighboring [Babylon](#). Cyrus, the first of the Archemid dynasty, conquered Babylon in 539 B.C.E. and permitted the Jewish exiles to return to the Land of Israel, bringing the First Exile to an end. The Jewish colonies were scattered from centers in Babylon to Persian provinces and cities such as Hamadan and Susa. The books of [Esther](#), [Ezra](#), [Nehemiah](#), and [Daniel](#) give a favorable description of the relationship of the [Jews](#) to the court of the Achaemids at Susa.

Under the Sassanid dynasty (226-642 C.E.), the Jewish population in Persia grew considerably and spread throughout the region; nevertheless, [Jews](#) suffered intermittent oppression and persecution. The invasion by [Arab Muslims](#) in 642 C.E. terminated the independence of [Persia](#), installed Islam as the state religion, and made a deep impact on the [Jews](#) by changing their sociopolitical status.

Throughout the 19th century, [Jews](#) were persecuted and discriminated against. Sometimes whole communities were forced to convert. During the 19th century, there was considerable emigration to the Land of Israel, and the [Zionist movement](#) spread throughout the community.

Under the Phalevi Dynasty, established in 1925, the country was secularized and oriented toward the West. This greatly benefited the [Jews](#), who were emancipated and played an important role in the economy and in cultural life. On the eve of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, 80,000 [Jews](#) lived in Iran. In the wake of the upheaval, tens of thousands of [Jews](#), especially the wealthy, left the country, leaving behind vast amounts of property.

The Council of the Jewish Community, which was established after World War II, is the representative body of the community. The [Jews](#) also have a representative in parliament who is obligated by law to support Iranian foreign policy and its [Anti-Zionist](#) position.

Despite the official distinction between "[Jews](#)," "Zionists," and "Israel," the most common accusation the [Jews](#) encounter is that of maintaining contacts with Zionists. The Jewish community does enjoy a measure of religious freedom but is faced with

constant suspicion of cooperating with the Zionist state and with "imperialistic America" — both such activities are punishable by death. [Jews](#) who apply for a passport to travel abroad must do so in a special bureau and are immediately put under surveillance. The government does not generally allow all members of a family to travel abroad at the same time to prevent Jewish emigration. Again, the [Jews](#) live under the status of *dhimmi*, with the restrictions imposed on religious minorities. Jewish leaders fear government reprisals if they draw attention to official mistreatment of their community.

Iran's official government-controlled media often issues [anti-Semitic](#) propaganda. A prime example is the government's publishing of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a notorious Czarist forgery, in 1994 and 1999.<sup>2</sup> [Jews](#) also suffer varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and public accommodations.<sup>3</sup>

The Islamization of the country has brought about strict control over Jewish educational institutions. Before the revolution, there were some 20 Jewish schools functioning throughout the country. In recent years, most of these have been closed down. In the remaining schools, Jewish principals have been replaced by Muslims. In Tehran there are still three schools in which Jewish pupils constitute a majority. The curriculum is Islamic, and Persian is forbidden as the language of instruction for Jewish studies. Special Hebrew lessons are conducted on Fridays by the Orthodox Otzar ha-Torah organization, which is responsible for Jewish religious education. Saturday is no longer officially recognized as the Jewish [sabbath](#), and Jewish pupils are compelled to attend school on that day. There are three synagogues in Tehran, but since 1994, there has been no rabbi in Iran, and the bet din does not function.<sup>4</sup>

Following the overthrow of the shah and the declaration of an Islamic state in 1979, Iran severed relations with Israel. The country has subsequently supported many of the Islamic terrorist organizations that target [Jews](#) and Israelis, particularly the Lebanon-based, Hezbollah. Nevertheless, Iran's Jewish community is the largest in the Middle East outside Israel.

On the eve of [Passover](#) in 1999, 13 [Jews](#) from Shiraz and Isfahan in southern Iran were arrested and accused of spying for [Israel](#) and the United States. In September 2000, an Iranian appeals court upheld a decision to imprison ten of the thirteen [Jews](#) accused of spying for Israel. In the appeals court, ten of the accused were found guilty of cooperating with Israel and were given prison terms ranging from two to nine years. Three of the accused were found innocent in the first trial.<sup>5</sup> In March 2001, one of the imprisoned [Jews](#) was released, a second was freed in January 2002, the remaining eight were set free in late October 2002. The last five apparently were released on furlough for an indefinite period, leaving them vulnerable to future arrest. Three others were reportedly pardoned by Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.<sup>6</sup>

At least 13 [Jews](#) have been executed in Iran since the Islamic revolution, most of them for either religious reasons or their connection to Israel. For example, in May 1998, Jewish businessman Ruhollah Kakhodah-Zadeh was hanged in prison without a public charge or legal proceeding, apparently for assisting [Jews](#) to emigrate.<sup>7</sup>

Today, Iran's Jewish population is the second largest in the Middle East, after Israel. Reports vary as to the condition and treatment of the small, tight-knit community, and the population of Iranian [Jews](#) can only be estimated due to the community's isolation from world Jewry.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> [U.S. Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2009](#), Released by the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Washington, DC, (October 26, 2009)

<sup>2</sup> [U.S. Department of State Report on Human Rights Practices for 1997](#).

<sup>3</sup> "Many [Jews](#) Choose to Stay in Iran," Associated Press, (Jan. 18, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> [Jewish Communities of the World](#). Reprinted with permission of the [World Jewish Congress \(WJC\)](#). Copyright 1997; Institute of the World Jewish Congress. [U.S. State Department Report on Human Rights Practices for 1997](#).

<sup>5</sup> Schneider, Howard. "Iran Court Reduces Penalties for [Jews](#)." [Washington Post](#), (September 22, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> [Jerusalem Post](#), (January 16, 2002); [Washington Jewish Week](#), (October 31, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> [U.S. Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2001](#), Released by the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Washington, DC, (October 26, 2001).