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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.

By **Scott Peterson**, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

April 27, 2007

TEHRAN, IRAN

Enmity runs deep between arch-foes Iran and Israel. And that confrontation complicates the lives of Iranian Jews, who make up the largest community of Jews in the Middle East outside the Jewish state.

Iran's Jews are buffeted by inflammatory rhetoric from President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad about "wiping Israel off the map" and denying the Holocaust, and a politically charged environment that often equates all Jews with Israel and routinely witnesses the burning of the "enemy" flag.

But despite what appears to be a dwindling minority under constant threat of persecution, Iranian Jews say they live in relative freedom in the Islamic Republic, remain loyal to the land of their birth, and are striving to separate politics from

religion.

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≡ They caution against comparing Iran's official and visceral opposition to the creation of Israel and Zionism with the regime's acceptance of Jews and Judaism

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"If you think Judaism and Zionism are one, it is like thinking Islam and the Taliban are the same, and they are not," says Ciamak Moresadegh, chairman of the Tehran Jewish Committee. "We have common problems with Iranian Muslims. If a war were to start, we would also be a target. When a missile lands, it does not ask if you are a Muslim or a Jew. It lands."

The continuous Jewish presence in Iran predates Islam by more than a millennium. One wave came when Jews sought to escape Assyrian king Nebuchadnezzar II around 680 BC; others were freed from slavery by Cyrus the Great with the conquest of Babylon some 140 years later.

Anti-Semitism historically 'rare'

Historically, say Jewish leaders, anti-Semitism here is rare, a fact they say is often lost on critics outside, especially in Israel, where many Iranian Jews have relatives. Still, the Jewish community has thinned by more than two-thirds since Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution, to some 25,000; the largest exodus took place soon after the Islamic Republic was formed, though a modest flow out continues.

"Our problem is that the Israel issue is not solved, and that affects us here," says one Iranian Jew who asked not to be named.

But that does not affect every Iranian Jew. Surgeon Homayoun Mohaber measures his nationalism in blood, and bits of metal – the kind of support that Iranian Jews say has defined their small community's ties to Iran.

During the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, as an Iranian military surgeon, Dr.

Mohaber conducted more than 900 front-line operations, was himself wounded, and gave blood twice to save fellow Iranian soldiers.



Today, in his Tehran clinic, he keeps a jar full of bullets and shrapnel fragments, extracted during the war from wounded soldiers.

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"The relations between Jews and Muslims, between 70 million Muslims and 30,000 Jews, are very good," says Mohaber. "In Israel, the situation for Iranian Jews is quite misunderstood."

"[The Islamic regime] made very good respect for me all the time, and did not care about my religion after the revolution," says Mohaber, who avoided a general purge of Jews from the officer ranks after Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution.

But some episodes have shaken those who remain. In 1999, charges of spying for Israel were brought against 13 Jews in Shiraz and Isfahan, sparking a new exodus and widespread fear.

Amid a welter of international criticism, 10 of those charged were handed sentences – later shortened – that ranged from four to 13 years in prison.

Jews in Tehran at the time told the Monitor of their fears that "Zionist groups connected with the US" were hurting their cause by using the issue against Iran. Today, all 13 are free, and remain living in Iran.

"The effect [of the Shiraz cases] was very bad," recalls Mohaber. "But they have rectified it. I think it was a political case between Iran and Israel."

Fine line between faith and politics

The saga underscored the delicate line Iranian Jews draw daily between their religion and politics. Outside Iran, "they think our condition is very bad, living as a minority in a religious country, with law based on Islamic law," says Mr. Moresadegh, of the Jewish Committee.

He notes "some difficulties," including restrictions on government employment, but says that Mr. Ahmadinejad's questioning of the Holocaust, while very unwelcome, "has no effect on our daily life." The president's fierce anti-Zionist speeches culminated with Iran hosting a controversial Holocaust conference last December.

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"It is quite clear that a bunch of Zionist racists are the problem the modern world is facing today," the president said in his Iranian New Year message on March 21. They aim "to keep the world in a state of hardship, poverty, and grudge and strengthen their rule. The great nation of Iran is opposed to this inhuman trend."

The Iranian Foreign Ministry recently facilitated a day-long visit to significant Jewish sites in Tehran for the diplomatic corps. Privately, Iranian officials said the event was designed to reassure Iranian Jews, after unease over the December conference.

Jewish leaders portrayed themselves as ordinary Iranians, facing the same problems and with the same aspirations for their nation.

"The Jewish community was probably one of the first [minority groups] to join in with the revolution, and in this way gave many martyrs," Maurice Motamed, holder of the one seat set aside for Jews in Iran's 290-seat parliament, told the diplomats. "And after that, during the eight years of the imposed [Iran-Iraq] war, there were many martyrs and disabled given to Iranian society."

"Every revolution is followed by some issues, problems, and restrictions [on minorities]," said Mr. Motamed. "Fortunately, all these effects have been completely removed in the last ten years."

The diplomatic tour – with a number of Foreign Affairs Ministry officials – visited a Jewish school, a home for the elderly, a community center, and one of 100 synagogues left from Iran, during Friday Sabbath prayers.



"We have obviously had a migration beyond of Iran," says Asghar Seleh, a teacher of Jewish heritage with a white yarmulke skullcap, who says he loses two to three students per year in classes of up to 30. Upon the walls of the Jewish school are portraits of revolution leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and Iran's current supreme religious leader.

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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."

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 Israel and Iran in the finals 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." **Beyond fear, beyond anger. Real news, real hope.**

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.



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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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ISSN 2573-3850 (online)

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