

Jews in Iran since the Islamic Revolution: Social Status and anti-Semitism

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Abstract

The appearance of Judaism dates back to 721 BC with the deportations of thousands of Jews from their homeland Judea (Israel) by Assyrian rule and their enforced settlement in Media and later to South-west Persia. The first marked improvement in the legal status of the minorities was during the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1907) following which Persian people were declared as equal before eyes of law. The Quranic concept of ahl-al-kitab (People of the Book) laid the foundation for the recognised religious minorities (RRM) in the Islamic Republic of Iran and rights of the Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians are guaranteed under the 1979 constitution. Following pre-revolution practice, the recognised religious minorities (RRMs) in the Islamic Republic are given representation in the 290-member majlis (Parliament); reserving them five seats of which one belongs to the Jews. The exodus of Jewish population, even though, can be traced way before the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the emigration of Jewish population from Persia are majorly seen to be immigrated to countries like America, Israel and other countries of Europe. This exodus increased significantly following the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic. The reason behind exodus is not the persecution of Jewish population, as was witnessed during Holocaust period, but because of the effect the revolution had on the social and economic status of Jews in the country. Ayatollah Khomeini, seen to have non-favourable opinions on Jews in his various speeches before the revolution, however, has issued a fatwa differentiating Jews from Zionists and declared Jews in Iran as Iranians. Nevertheless, one notices a change in the treatment of religious minorities, specially Jews, before and after the establishment of the Islamic Republic. While the concept of impurity was stereotyped before the revolution in dealing with Jews, something the Pahlavi rulers have sought to remove, the Islamic Republic has found a new way for its ill-treatment of its Jewish population, that is, by framing Jews as espionage of the Zionists, or has those who has links to Israel. Moreover, anti-Semitism is found to be present in portraying Jews in Iran through its education system. This paper therefore, seeks to analyse the reason behind Jewish exodus from Iran after 1979, the treatment of Jews in terms of religious freedom, social status and education, the prevalence of anti-Semitism in the country and the perspectives of the state authorities in Iran noticed since 1979.

Historical Background:

Iranian Jewry happens to be the largest Jewish population in West Asia after Israel, having their first settlements in the land of Persia (in present west and southwest Iran to be precise) seeking exile following their expulsion from Judea (Palestine) by Assyrian rule. Jews in Persia have kept alive in their collective memory of King Cyrus of the first Achaemenian empire, who allowed Jewish exiles in Persia to return to their homeland, following the conquest of Babylon 539 BC. Given the cordial atmosphere in Persia provided by Achaemenid rule during those time, most Jews decided not to return and chose to settle in

Persia. Those who settled gradually began to speak Persian as their mother tongue. It is their successive generations which today constitute the Jewry of present Islamic Republic of Iran. While Jewish life prospered during Achaemenid rule, the subsequent Sassanid rule paved way for tensed relations with the Jews whose status and freedom in the region was significantly affected. Tensions eased when Jews supported Persia in its battle against the Romans. The Arab conquest of Persia in 642 AD further brought new alterations of the Jewish situation. While they were allowed to exercise their cultural practices, *jizya* tax or special poll tax was imposed on them, in addition to regular tax. It was during this time the contract of *dhimmi* became applicable to the People of the Book (*ahl-al-kebab*) which included monolithic religious mentioned in the Quran (but later, also included the Zoroastrian religion). When Shi'ism was adopted as state religion under Safavid rule, large sections of Jewish population converted to Islam in 16th and 17th centuries, as a result of forced conversions and also some conversed willing, along with other religious minority communities, to evade heavy burden of taxation on non-Muslim population, thereby leading to their demographic change in Persia. The concept of "uncleanliness" was introduced by a Safavid clergy which greatly affected the Jewish population in the region, giving rise to stereotypes, which Jews have been a victim of for the longest time.

Thus, being a minority since their settlement, Iranian Jewry witnessed dynamism, empires after empires, in its social status, education, economic and political life, experiencing prosperity as well as persecutions from time to time. Gradually, Jews in Persia began to adopt Persian names for their children and even translated their prayers in Persian, thereby leading to cultural assimilation of Jews with Iran. It was only after the Constitutional Revolution of 1905 that for the first time gave recognised religious minority groups, which included the Jews, equal status like that of Muslims and provided for their parliamentarian representation (one seat) as well as removal of *jizya* tax. The Pahlavi period, however, is considered to be comparatively better times for Jews and other minority groups, with the imposition of westernised, secularised modernity projects in the country. Islamisation of the state which owes its genesis to 1979 Revolution, however, projected a variant life for the Jews along with other minority groups, thus opening a new phase of state-minority relations in the country.

Zionism and Jewish emigration from Iran

While those considered Iranian Jewry who owe their historical roots to Babylonian exile have not suffered from Holocaust, Iran, nevertheless, has provided refuge ground for Jewish

refugees fleeing war-torn Europe. Mention must be made here of the first phase of immigration of Polish Jews, around 43,000 of them, who fled into Soviet Union and arrived at Bandar Pahlavi port in northern Iran in 1942 (Dekel, 2019). But the following year, they migrated to other parts of the country like India, Lebanon Syria and majority to British-controlled Palestine, when the economic hardships increased in Iran which led to popular demonstrations and protests (ibid).

The year 1948 marked the beginning of the most challenging times in the history of West Asia with the establishment of the State of Israel. Even prior to its establishment since early 1940s, Zionist organisations began to launch their projects in different parts of the world, and even in Iran, to attract and influence Jewish populations to immigrate to Israel. It is this way Zionist organisations reached Iran and through this cultural encounter, that Iranian Jews had their encounter with political Zionism. However, with Balfour Declaration of 1917, the Jews in Iran had their first exposure to political Zionism when a telegram was sent to them by Zionists in Petrograd and passed on by Azizallah Tizabgar to religious leader in Tehran (Habib Levy, as mentioned in Sternfeld, 2019). Nevertheless, since Iranian Jews did not face persecution like that of Holocaust as faced by European Jews, their relations with Eretz Israel (Land of Israel) remain one of “mythical nostalgia” and not a political one, as opined Alessandra Cecolin (2016). The political instability during the war period led to anti-Semitic riots in Iran, in Jew-inhabited cities of Esfahan, Kashan. Shiraz and Kirman also contributed to Jewish emigration to Jerusalem from 1906-1921 (Price, 2005). With the relaxation provided to Zionist organisations by Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925-41), the penetration of political Zionism took into effort. For it was during his rulership that relaxation was provide to the Jews, their situation improved and the concept of ritual impurity attached to them was abandoned (Price, 2005).

To understand the immigration of Jews to Israel after 1948, it is important to understand the perception of Iranian Jews by the Israeli Zionists. The perception is believed to be similar to their understanding of Arab or Mizrahi Jews, through prism of orientalism. Like Arab Jews, Iranian Jews were also located in their view of Persian culture as uncivilised, backward and traditional, that needed saving and transformation to a modernised and Aryanised race (Ram, 2008). Mention must be made of two particular organisatons, Jewish Agency and American Joint Jewish Distribution Committee (JDC). It is through their efforts that Operation Cyrus (1948-51) was materialised which resulted in the first phase of about 30,000 Iranian Jewish

immigration to Israel (Ram, 2008), although Sternfeld (2019) considers this figure to be “hyper-Zionist.”

Religious Zionism, however, was in effect prior to the implementation of political Zionism in Iran. Creation of Zionist organisations like HeHalutz (the Pioneer) established in 1946 took under its garb many such other Zionist organisations which began its training to empower the Jewish Iranian youth to make them feel more connected to living in Israel than in Iran (Yeroushalmi, 2007). Classes in Hebrew language and lessons on the promised land provided in Iranian synagogues provided for such empowerment, although the ultimate goal was to encourage their emigration (Sternfeld, 2019). However, different factions of Zionists emerged among Jews in Iran, having their different opinions on the notion of emigration, leading to fragmentation of Iranian Jewish community’s approach to Zionism. It was a time when Jews could be encompassing of different identities simultaneously—like being a Zionist and a Communist or being a Zionist and an Iranian nationalist (Cecolin, 2016).

Iran became the second Muslim-majority country to give de-facto recognition to Israel as a state in 1950, after Turkey, contributing to increasing cordial relations between Israel and Iranian monarchy and leading to further flexibility of international Zionist organisations to further their operations in Iran. While Jews contributed in aiding Zionist projects in Iran, either monetarily through providing shelter in synagogues, schools and transit camps, helping Jews from countries like Iraq and Syria, Pakistan and India in their transition to Israel through Iran, the number of Iranian immigrations itself remained few. Nevertheless, those Iranians who immigrated belonged to impoverished who made their transition to Israel in hope for a better life and improved social status, rather than for religious or political purpose (Sternfeld, 2019). Another reason for mass immigration of Jewish population is the increasing political instability and the Arab-Israeli conflict which paved for growing discrimination and anti-Semitism in the region.

Soon in 1951, the criteria for emigration was changed by Israel and Jewish Agency who were primarily now focused on young, healthy, educated and skilled Jews who could make the emigration and contribute to the state-building. Their main priority also shifted to immigrants who came from conflicted regions that suffered Jewish persecutions, which Jews in Iran did not fall under. As a result, this greatly affected the immigration process since most Iranian Jews who took refuge to shelter camps in Tehran for emigration failed to meet these criteria (Cecolin, 2018). Moreover, the implementation practically meant breaking of Jewish families,

whose culture, like that of the remaining family structure in Iran, has been close knit. In the meantime, those Iranian Jews who immigrated, about one-fourth percent of them, expressed in letters to their families and relatives of their disappointment, dislocation, discriminations and ill-treatment by the Israelis who are predominantly Ashkenazim and never gave the equal treatment and respect to Iranian Jews, reality of life in Israel far from being their dreams and expectations of a better life in the promised land. In the 1960s and 70s, unknown number of such immigrants seem to return back to Iran (Yeroushalmi, 2007).

The aftermath of the 1967 war increased complexity for Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941-78), the second Pahlavi ruler to maintain close relations with Israel, amidst the tensed atmosphere and the apathy and rivalry of Arab countries towards Israel. To maintain its Muslim solidarity, the Pahlavi ruler discontinued all diplomatic relations with Israel and also declared all non-Iranian origin Zionist organisations illegal to operate in the country. Nevertheless, these organisations continued to operate silently, maintaining a low-profile. This development provided a setback for Zionist organisations to successfully operate their projects in the country and therefore, resulted in low transition of Jewish immigration from Iran to Israel. It is important to note here that the Iranian immigrants who moved to Israel after 1948 and before 1979, are not victims suffering persecution and forced migration for their religion, as was the case in other West Asian countries and in Europe, but they did so because of their own will, to have an upward social mobility than for religious reasons as well (Yeroushalmi, 2007).

Islamic Revolution and its immediate aftermath

The role of Jewish community in the 1979 Revolution has been not much researched on by scholars whose readings has largely been focused on women, student and youth communities. During the second Pahlavi ruler's time, Jewish community has experienced factionalism. While the community of the old guard, constituting religious factions and business, have been pro-Shah in its political understanding, a number of Iranian youth and intellectuals have inclined towards the leftist tendencies and some even becoming part of the Tudeh Communist Party of Iran later on, following its establishment in 1941. The most prominent group of young Jewish intellectuals who have been active anti-Shah revolutionaries in the '79 Revolution was Association of Jewish Iranian Intellectuals (AJII), established in March 1978 (Sternfeld, 2014). Their weekly magazine Tamuz, despite its Marxist leanings, made efforts to link traditional Jewish values to the revolution in an attempt to unite Tehran's Jewish

communities and also to attune to the Islamic Iranian identity, still nascent in its emergence, that was about to be the dominant state discourse (ibid). Mention should also be made of their close collaborations with Sapir Hospital, a private Jewish hospital, whose contribution had been immense to the revolutionaries of this historic time. When injured protestors could not seek their treatment to government-run hospitals for the fear of been turned in to the Shah's intelligence group SAVAK, these protestors were taken in and given treatment in the Sapir Hospital. The highest ranks of this hospital's close collaboration to Ayatollah Sayyad Mahmud Taleqani, Khomeini's representative in Tehran during the revolutionary period, speaks volume of the prestige Sapir Hospital gained during the Revolution, which continued even after the establishment of the Islamic Republic (ibid). Another group named Jewish Council for Cultural and Social Advancement conducted seminars to bring together different political groups in order to have a better comprehension of the opinions of factions among Jewish communities in the country (Sansarian, 2004). The leftist Jewish organisations, too, have been a vocal critique of Israel in its anti-Zionist stance, much like the rest of the protestors during the Revolution (ibid).

However, anti-Israeli/anti-Zionist sentiments that loomed large during the period of Revolution, which largely affected the Jewish community in Iran in the initial stages of the establishment of the Islamic Republic (Rahimiyan, 2010). Envisioning the religious discourse the state-building would adopt, a delegation of Jewish community met Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the '79 Revolution, in Paris where he was in exile, to get assurance from the leader that Jewish communities in Iran be acknowledged as supporters of the Revolution and not its enemies. Soon after the visit, Khomeini gave Sapir Hospital his recognition (Sternfeld, 2014). A redefined trend came upon minority Jewish community with the emergence of the Islamic discourse in the state-building, where Jewish communities asserted their "Iranianess" more than their religious identity (Ram, 2009). It was during Khomeini's return to Iran from his exile in Paris, that Chief Rabbi Yedidya Shofet leading 5,000 Jews welcomed his arrival with placards saying, "Jews and Muslims are brothers." (Rahimiyan, 2010).

Differing from the pattern of immigration before 1979, which mainly constituted of rural, economically weak immigrants from Iran to settle in Israel, the immigrants that started to move out of Iran mostly were of educated, skilled, middle class urban sections of the population. The relaxation and friendly relations between Iran and Israel in the 1960s attribute to the improving economic status of the Jews before the revolution. However, within

a year of the Revolution, the Jewish emigration from Iran reduced the Jewish population in Iran from 80,000 to 50/60,000, and further reduced in number in the subsequent era (Price, 2005). The Tehran Jewish Committee, however, estimates that 100,000-150,000 Jewish population inhabited in Iran before the Revolution, about 12-15,000 Jews are presently in Iran (USA Today, 2018). While many scholars like Soli Shahvar (2009) attribute post-revolution persecution, confiscation of property and blurring anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish sentiments together to be factors behind Jewish emigration from Iran, only a few thousands went to settle in Israel while majority of the immigrants moved to Euro-American countries, which speaks volume of Iranian Jewish community's non-Zionist attributes, according to Haggai Ram (2008). This gives the impression that despite the change in minority situation that Jewish community in Iran envisioned and began to face after revolution, most did not view Israel as a place for their redemption. The memory of historical mistreatment and inattention provided by Zionist organisations in Israel to the Iranian Jews three decades ago is still fresh, in addition to the cultural difference and non-affinity that Iranian Jews suffered who immigrated to Israel, must be the contributory factors behind such low rate of immigration to Israel.

Social status and treatment of Jews until 2005

The situation in the immediate aftermath of the establishment of the Islamic Republic proved detrimental to the situation of Jews and were subjected to further dynamics in their social and economic status, even though their political status remained untouched in the new Constitution. The outright anti-Zionist and anti-Israel positions taken by the new authority subsequently turned into anti-Jewish narrative in the treatment of Jews during the initial stages of the establishment of the Islamic Republic and their social life came under much scrutiny. Only weeks after the Revolution on 9 May 1979, Jewish philanthropist and industrialist Habib Elghanian was executed on charges of espionage for Israel, in addition to “friendship with enemies of God, spending funds and benefits which have been derived from the exploitation of Iranians to construct belligerent usurper to Israel which is against Islam and God, corruption on earth, fighting against God, the Prophet and the representative of the Twelfth Imam, obstructing Islamic and human values”, charges which Amnesty International observed to be the first charges against a non-Muslim on Quranic offenses (Marshall and Shea, 2011).

This was reason enough for Iranian Jews to worry about their changing status in the newly formed Islamic Republic and soon several Jewish leaders met Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini expressing their solidarity with the new Islamic state establishment along with their concern over the treatment towards their religious community. Khomeini, in this meet, reiterated the differences between Zionism and Judaism, assuring the Iranian Jewish community that they are Iran's authentic citizens and not to be confused with "bloodsucking Zionists" (Rafizadeh, 2017). Zionism, Khomeini opined, has nothing to do with religion which is contrary to the religious principles advocated by Prophet Moses. A decree was shortly published to the public assuring that no executions would be meted out to the Jewish community, except for charges of murder (Sansarian, 2004). This position of Khomeini's has since been the official position of the Islamic Republic, whenever it has been accused by other countries, especially the United States of America and Israel, of being anti-Semitic. Nevertheless, the charges of espionage for Israel has been held against the country's Jewish community particularly and continued even after Khomeini's decree was made public. Like in the year 1980 itself, eight Jews were sentenced to death on charges of espionage for Israel, fraternisation with Zionism, corruption and treason (Amirpur, 2012). The same year Chief Rabbi Yedidya Shoffet, who met Khomeini in 1979 assuring the loyalty of Jewish community to him, left for Europe, asking Jews to leave Iran (Sansarian, 2004).

The reform period of Khatami had great expectations of religious freedom and social liberty on every sections of the population, including the minorities. However, the reality was far from such expectations for the Jewish community, for the periodic instances of prejudicial discrimination that the community had to be subjected to. For instance, the execution of Jewish business Kadkhodah Zadeh in 1998 on charges of helping the emigration of Iranian Jews; the 1999 arrest without any initial charge and trial of 13 Jews from Shiraz and Esfahan (age ranging from 17-49) on alleged charges of acts of espionage for Israel had been consistent in the state authority's acts of suspicion against the Jewish community in Iran. The 1999 arrest had met with widespread criticisms against Iran not only by Jewish people within Iran, but also by Jewish communities abroad, which led Khatami to give a public statement assuring religious beliefs to not be the reason behind one's persecution in the country, further adding to defend civil rights of all citizens, regardless of one's religious beliefs (US, 2014). As a sign of improvement, due to the consistent persuasion of the lone two-time elected Minister of Parliament representing the Jewish community in the country, Morris Motamaed (2000-2008), succeeded in raising the blood money (ransom) of victims belonging to

minority religious community, including Jews, as equal to that of Muslims in 2002, until which the amount to be paid to non-Muslim communities was half of ransom to be paid to Muslims (Amirpur, 2012).

In terms of religious freedom, Jews were allowed to print their religious book Torah in Hebrew, allowed to have their synagogues, hospitals and schools, although religious activities are under close monitoring by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Ershad) and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MoIS) (US, 2010). In the initial era of the Republic, restrictions were posed against Jews who wished to travel abroad and non-Muslims, including Jews, were barred from engaging in activities that involved in persuasion and conversion to Muslims to non-Islamic faith, activities that are considered as proselytising and have punitive measures, including death charges, attached to it (US, 2013). Although allowed to learn Hebrew for religious practice, the government had limited the distribution of non-religious texts in Hebrew, constraining the freedom to learn Hebrew language, as provided in their constitutional rights. Moreover, private schools run by Jewish communities had to remain open on the day of Sabbat (Saturday) which further provided obstacle in the observance of Jew's religious practices. While it was a requirement for minority-run private schools to have Muslim principals (Sansarian, 2004), the directors of such schools are under requirement to pass *gozinesh* (evaluation to determine one's adherence to the government's ideology and knowledge of state's interpretation of Shi'i Islam) (US, 2012). Anti-Semitic publications like Protocols of the Zion seem to be available in Iran, in volumes including Arabic and Persian translations (ibid).

From Ahmadinejad to Rouhani

Hardliner President Mahmud Ahmadinejad came to power in May 2005, bringing in the conservative political ideology of the Islamic Republic. His presidential tenure has been the most controversial phase so far as Iranian Jewish community are concerned, which not only met with criticisms within the nation but also brought Iran's image as an "anti-Semitic state" before the world.

At A World Without Zionism conference in Tehran in October 2005, Ahmadinejad delivered a speech where referring to Israel, he said, "this regime that occupies Jerusalem will disappear from the pages of history" which was (mis)translated all over the world as "Israel must be wiped off the map", thereby calling for the destruction of Israel (Amirpur, 2012).

This speech got worldwide criticism as an anti-Semitic speech by Ahmadinejad and as an open call for Iran's attack on Israel, although now Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and then Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki reiterated Iran's non-intention of act of aggression against any country (ibid). Two months later, in his address to the crowds of Zahedan, Ahmadinejad expressed his doubts on the Nazi killing of Jews and further declared Holocaust to be "a myth which they consider to be above God, religion and Prophets" (The Guardian, 2005). Another "Holocaust Conference" was organised by Ahmadinejad in Tehran in December 2006. This year also witnessed Iran hosting Holocaust Cartoon contest, as a mark of protest against the anti-Islamic cartoons published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* (UN Watch, 2018).

In a report published on Evaluating UN'S performance on Anti-Semitism from 2008-2017 by the United Nations Watch (UN Watch) in 2018, it noted the silence of Secretary General Ban Ki-moon on the growing anti-Semitic attacks in the West Asians countries, "including Iran's Holocaust denial, Jewish conspiracy theories and calls to commit genocide" (UN Watch, 2018). Interestingly, the United Nations considers Iran's anti-Israel stand as an act of anti-Semitism. It says :

Nowhere is this antisemitic incitement more extreme than in Iran, where the government refers to Israel as the "little Satan" (next to the "great Satan" of America), and blames Jews and Israel for all the evils in the world. Iran is the greatest state purveyor of Holocaust denial, a major characteristic of modern antisemitism. Its officials regularly question whether the Holocaust happened, and the government has hosted several cartoon contests with antisemitic themes, including its most recent Holocaust cartoon contest in May 2016. (UN Watch, 2018).

At the UN's Durban Review Conference on Racism (known as Durban II) of April 2009, Ahmadinejad claimed that "the Zionist regime was created under the pretext of Jewish sufferings", and that "Zionism personifies racism that falsely resorts to religion and abuses religious sentiments to hide their hatred and ugly faces" (UN Watch, 2018). This was observed by UN Watch as an attack on Jews and Israel. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, in response, made the following statement:

I deplore the use of this platform by the Iranian President to accuse, divide and even incite. This is the opposite of what this Conference seeks to achieve. This makes it significantly more difficult to build constructive solutions to the very real problem of racism.... I reminded the President that the United Nations General Assembly had adopted the resolutions to revoke the equation of Zionism with racism and to reaffirm the historical facts of the Holocaust respectively (UN, 2009).

Ahmadinejad's stand on Holocaust and his anti-Zionist/anti-Israel rhetoric has been perceived as anti-Semitic attacks by the world community. The Jewish community, too, expressed their opposition to narratives on the denial of Holocaust, although Iranian Jewish community publicly express their anti-Zionist and anti-Israel position time and again (Amirpur, 2012). However, this did not mean that Jews in Iran have been sufferers of such anti-Semitic position of the President. Infact in 2007, there has been news that the Israeli government's offer to the Iranian Jewish community of paying \$60,000 US dollar to each family and \$10,000 US dollar to each individual to emigrate to Israel, which the Tehran Jewish Community rejected (USA Today, 2018). Thus, notwithstanding Ahmadinejad's stand on Holocaust, this did not reflect on the treatment of Jews in Iran.

With the coming of the present President Hassan Rouhani to power, the recognition of the Jewish community as part of Iranian nationhood seem to emerge more visible, possibly to eradicate the anti-Semitic image Rouhani's predecessor has created in the world community. In 2014, Rouhani tweeted Rosh Hashanah, Jewish New year to Jews worldwide and specially addressing it to the Jewish community in accompanied with him the Jewish *majles* representative, Moreh-Sedeq, to the UN General Assembly (Sternfeld, 2019) and unveiled a memorial for the Jewish martyrs of Iran-Iraq War, attending by leaders of the Jewish community in the country and many state officials (Haaretz, 2014). A law was also passed in the cabinet which now excuses Jewish children to not attend schools on Sabbath, which has been accommodated as a holiday for the Jewish community (US, 2017). The reformist government also reformulated it position on Holocaust, differing from Ahmadinejad's stand. Mohammad Zarif, Iran's Foreign Minister responding to the NBC interview on question of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's allegation of "Iran's regime is not merely a Jewish problem, any more than Nazi's were a Jewish problem", recalled the book of Esther, which shows how it was an Iranian king who saved the Jews, alleging Netanyahu to distort not just contemporary reality but also the Biblical one (NBC, 2015). He further responded that Iran never spoke of annihilation of Jews as been accused by Netanyahu (ibid).

Conclusion

Jews in Iran have kept in their collective memory, their historical roots in Persia, which still provide the basis of their argument whenever asked why they still chose to remain in Iran, even after the establishment of the Islamic Republic. This historical root that goes back to Babylonian exile time also provide the main source of national identity among Jews in Iran,

their “Iranianness”, whereby their religious identity comes secondary. Not just Iranian Jews, but this historical connection of Judaism in Persia and their parliamentarian have been reiterated time and again by the state authorities of the Islamic Republic, whenever they have been accused of anti-Semitism from western countries and the UN. Since their settlement in Persia, Jews have inculcated the culture and language of the land they settled in, which paved for their further integration in Persia and with the people of Persia. Iranian Jews, although marginalised, have been vocal in their opposition against Zionist ideology and the state of Israel, and their immigration pattern has largely been to America and European countries, rather than Israel, much to the dismay of the Israeli state, explaining further of Iranian Jewish’s non-perception of Israeli state as a place for their redemption.

The discrimination of Jews in Iran is not a new phenomenon that emerged since the Islamic Revolution, but rather is the product of prejudicial stereotypes, like ritual impurity, attached to the Jewish community since time immemorial. However, with the establishment of the State of Israel, these prejudices further took transition in their anti-Zionist and anti-Israeli stand that have often been used interchangeably with Judaism. Even though the official position seems to emphasise on the differences between Judaism and Zionism, however, in reality they often end up making these distinctions blurry that make them appear as anti-Semitism. The troubled relation with Israel after the Revolution also translated in acts of suspicion on the Iranian Jewish community following the establishment of the Islamic Republic. While Zionist ideology and national identity (Iranian) of Iranian Jews were normal and interplaying during the Pahlavi period, pro-Zionist stand is viewed necessarily as pro-Israeli stand since the Revolution. The earlier pro-Zionist stand by some of the Jewish communities in Iran, even though became overtly anti-Zionist and anti-Israeli with time before the Revolution, seem to be largely ignored by the state authorities of the Islamic Republic, despite the repeated assurance and publicisation of this stand by the Iranian Jewish community. It is this why Jews in Iran still fall prey to charges of espionage for Israel that are held against them, acts that can be viewed as anti-Semitism.

One should not view official position of Iran as an unified position on the Jewish community. While Ahmadinejad, and other conservative officials, had denied Holocaust in public, this is not the official position of Iran, as been often accused by the United Nations and the western countries. While the picture is not all rosy for the minority communities in Iran, with Rouhani coming to power, the situation looks much improved than earlier times.

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