Jewish-Iranian Identities in the Pahlavi Era

LIOR STERNFELD
Department of History, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Tex.; e-mail: lior@utexas.edu
doi:10.1017/S002074381400066X

A few years ago, while conducting archival research on Pahlavi-era Iranian newspapers, I came across a photo from the anti-shah demonstrations that took place in late 1978 and early 1979. It showed a large group of Armenians protesting against the shah. In these years many Iranians and Westerners considered the shah's policies beneficial for religious minorities in Iran. Around the same time, I found a sentence that made this discovery more intriguing. In his seminal work *Iran between Two Revolutions*, Ervand Abrahamian mentions that throughout the Muhammad Riza Pahlavi era, the opposition to the communist Tudeh party accused it of being controlled by "Armenians, Jews, and Caucasian émigrés."[1] I tried to find references in the current scholarship to Jews participating in the party, which could have earned them their part in this propaganda campaign, but found very little. Having read the important works of Joel Beinin, Orit Bashkin, and Rami Ginat on Jewish revolutionaries, including communists, in the Middle East, I wondered where the Jewish radicals in Iran were.[2] Several factors may contribute to this silence in the historiography: the writing of Iranian history from a Zionist vantage point, a lack of interest in the history of the Iranian left in the postrevolutionary historiography, and an inability to conceptualize the transregional and global nature of the Iranian Jewish community.

According to most historical narratives that address the question, Jews in Iran, when they were politically active at all, exclusively supported the shah's government because of its close relations with Israel. Moreover, the assumption that Iranian Jews were almost irrelevant to national events, such as the 1979 revolution, has led to their exclusion from Iranian national historiography. As I suggest in this essay, however, Iranian Jewish communities underwent tremendous transformations over the course of the 20th century, ones that have been largely overlooked by both Iranian and non-Iranian scholars.

In his important book, Daniel Tsadik convincingly asserts that "one can hardly speak of diverse approaches, different schools of historiography, or even major debates among the few scholars who address Iranian Jewry's recent past."[3] The most comprehensive book on Iranian Jewry, written in 1960 by Habib Levy, depicts Jewish life in Iran from 1300 BCE to 1960.[4] Levy was a self-proclaimed Zionist; in fact, as Haggai Ram points out, Jewish Iranian history has been written consistently from within a Zionist paradigm. Most scholarship on Iranian Jewry, with a few notable exceptions, has been written by Israelis or by Jews of Iranian descent with connections to Israel. Some wrote from their personal experiences, and most did not write from within Iran.[5] While this scholarship provides important information on some aspects of Jewish life in Iran, it often portrays the community as an isolated entity within Iranian society and presumes that "the Jewish state is the only place where non-European Jews could escape a bitter fate."[6] Zionist leaning historiographies, in a sense, deny Jews historical agency by portraying them as passive victims up to the moment of their encounter with Zionism.

In recent years, historians such as Daniel Tsadik, David Yeroushalmi, and Mehrdad Amanat have spearheaded a revisionist wave of research on the Jewish communities of Iran in the 19th century, challenging common narratives of Jewish existence (which often focus on Shiʿi notions of impurity and on religious tensions) and revealing the rich and nuanced histories of these communities.[7] Yet there is still insufficient work on more recent histories of Jews in Iran.

One obstacle in writing an integrative account of Iranian Jews in the 20th century is that scholarship on national organizations in Iran in which Jews were active or dominant tend to focus more on the political legacy of those organizations than on the social, ethnic, or religious tapestry of the participants.[8] In my own research I have found that many Jews were adamant supporters of the Tudeh, and later engaged in many other political initiatives.[9] The Tudeh was the most vocal opponent of fascism in the 1940s, publicly denouncing the fascist inclinations of nationalist groups and opposing the prevailing anti-Semitic climate in Iran. The Tudeh's recurring defense of the Jewish community and message of equality attracted many young middle- and lower-middle-class Jews. As a former Jewish Tudeh activist told me in an interview: "I knew nothing about Marx or Marxism when I joined the Tudeh. I joined because this was the only place that they did not call me '*Johud*' [a derogatory name for Jews]."[10] This generation's political activism and participation in revolutionary movements continued well into the 1970s. During the protests of that decade, when Tudeh party activity had been outlawed, two Jewish activists, Harun Parviz Yeshaʾya and ʿAziz Daneshrad, were jailed for antimonarchical activity. After serving their time, they turned to political activity within the Jewish community.[11] Loyal to their leftist tendencies and religious identity, they gathered a dozen like-minded comrades and established the most significant Jewish organization of late 1970s Iran: Jamiʿah-i Rawshanfikran-i Yahudi-yi Iran (The Association of Jewish Iranian Intellectuals). This organization was instrumental in involving Jews in the events leading up to the 1979 revolution. Yet its existence has appeared only in a handful of scholarly works, including several studies by the late historian of Iran Amnon Netzer in the 1980s and an article by David Menashri.[12] Rewriting the history of leftist movements in Iran is essential to understanding the paradigms and worldviews that attracted so many people of minority communities to support and assume leadership positions in these movements. Studying the Jewish experience in the Tudeh party would help us understand the radical options, other than Zionism, that were available to Jews during and after the 1940s,

Iranian Jewish history has been captured between two other, contradictory, historiographical narratives. The first sees this history through such categories as the "Jews of Islam," lumping together Sunni and Shiʿi communities and conflating the histories of Jews in Arab lands with the radically different history of Iranian Jewry. The second is an assumption of communal stagnation that distorts the incredibly nuanced social tapestry of the Jewish population in Iran. While other countries in the region saw their Jewish population diminishing during the 20th century, especially since the 1940s, Iran witnessed the onset of a relatively thriving period for Jews. Not only did the majority of Jews remain in Iran in the 1940s, but the Jewish community grew in size, while also becoming more diverse than any other Jewish community in the Middle East outside Palestine. Iran and its Jewish population were part of global and transregional trajectories of displaced persons who found short- and long-term sanctuaries in countries not their

own. Encounters with other Jewish communities—European, Arab, and Sephardi—during the years of World War II and after the creation of the State of Israel led to shifts in the meaning of being Iranian and Jewish and to the increasingly transregional orientation of the community.

Scholarship that recognizes this transregional dimension seeks to integrate Iran into global events. For example, during the war many Europeans—among them Jews—came to Iran and found shelter there from the upheavals in Europe. Another significant group of Jews immigrating to Iran in those years came from Iraq. Following in the footsteps of Jews who left Iraq in an earlier wave from 1914 to 1918 to avoid conscription into the Ottoman army, this second wave was fleeing persecution and pogroms, most famously the Farhud in June 1941. Thousands of Jews came from Iraq to Iran on their way to Israel/Palestine because the transition camps in Iran were operated by the Jewish Agency and other Jewish relief organizations there. Jewish immigrants stayed in the transition camps for various periods of time, depending on the efficiency of the agencies' collaboration with the British Mandate government in Palestine. Many Iraqi Jews chose to stay in Iran with relatives who had already settled there, mainly in the borderland between Basra and Abadan. Another group of Jewish Iraqi immigrants had gone to Israel but decided to return to Iran.

Communism and Iranian patriotism were not the only political choices for Iranian Jews. Zionism loomed large as well. Recently a debate has been sparked in Israel around the motivations of Mizrahi Jews who immigrated to Israel soon after its establishment. For many years the official historiography held that Mizrahi Jews were among the most ardent supporters of the Zionist movement. Indeed, there are many accounts that validate this assumption. However, it ignores the different ways in which these Mizrahi Jews may have interpreted Zionism. The term itself is only as meaningful as the interpretations it is given and, as shown in the recent collection edited by Moshe Behar and Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, different thinkers attached different meanings to it.[13] Historical debates among Iranian Jews over these issues reveal the biggest challenge in researching Iranian Jewish history. Elias Eshaghian, a teacher and principal of several *Alliance* schools in Iran in the prerevolutionary era, wrote in his memoirs: "Iran has been my homeland [*vatan*] and Jerusalem has been the source of my belief in God and the direction of my prayers [*qiblah*]."[14] This quote encapsulates a sentiment that was very prevalent among young, educated Iranian Jews. Jews who were active in the Tudeh, supported Mosaddeq, and demonstrated against the shah's regime were not necessarily anti-Zionist; they may have just had different understandings of the term. Moreover, until 1967 large segments of the Iranian left viewed Zionism as a postcolonial movement and saw Israel as a sort of socialist utopia. An important example can be found in the renowned intellectual Jalal Al-e Ahmad's travelogue of his 1962 visit to Israel, which presented to the Iranian reader a relatively complex and favorable view of the country.[15]

NOTES

Author's note: I am grateful to Orit Bashkin for reading this essay and commenting on it.

[1]Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982), 452.

[2]Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics, and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998); Orit Bashkin, *New Babylonians: A History*

of Jews in Modern Iraq (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2012); Rami Ginat, *A History of Egyptian Communism: Jews and Their Compatriots in Quest of Revolution* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2011).

[3]Daniel Tsadik, *Between Foreigners and Shi'is: Nineteenth-Century Iran and Its Jewish Minority* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007).

[4]This book was originally published in Persian as a three-volume comprehensive history of the Jews of Iran, and was translated into English in 1999. Habib Levi, *Comprehensive History of the Jews of Iran: The Outset of the Diaspora* (Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda Publishers, 1999); idem, *Tarikh-i Yahud-i Iran* (Tehran: Barukhim, 1956).

[5]Haggai Ram, *Iranophobia: The Logic of an Israeli Obsession* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009).

[6]Ibid.

[7]Tsadik, *Between Foreigners and Shi'is*; David Yeroushalmi, *The Jews of Iran in the Nineteenth Century: Aspects of History, Community, and Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Mehrdad Amanat, *Jewish Identities in Iran: Resistance and Conversion to Islam and the Baha'i Faith* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011).

[8]See, for example, Maziar Behrooz's important and illuminating book on the Tudeh party, which nevertheless pays little attention to the ethnic and religious elements of the party. Maziar Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999).

[9]Lior Sternfeld, "Reclaiming Their Past: Writing Jewish History in Iran during the Pahlavi and Early Revolutionary Periods (1941–1989)" (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, in progress); idem, "The Revolution's Forgotten Sons and Daughters: The Jewish Community in Tehran during the 1979 Revolution," *Iranian Studies* (forthcoming).

[10]Interview with Habib, 24 June 2013, Los Angeles.

[11]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), 360.

[12]Amnon Netzer, *Yehude Iran be-Yamenu* (Jerusalem: HUJI Press, 1981); idem, "Yehude Iran, Yisra'el ve-ha-Republikah ha-Isla'mit shel Iran," *Gesher* 26 (1980): 45–57; idem, "ha-Yehudim ba-Republikah ha-Isla'mit shel Iran: Kronologiyah shel Ke'ev u-Metsukah," *Gesher* 611 (1987): 38–47; Menashri, "The Jews in Iran."

[13]Moshe Behar and Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, eds., *Modern Middle Eastern Jewish Thought: Writings on Identity, Politics, and Culture, 1893–1958* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2013).

[14]Ilyas Ishaqyan, *Hamrah Ba Farhang: Gushah'i Az Tarikh-i Mu'assasah-i Alyans Dar Iran/ Khatirat-i Ilyas Ishhaqyan* (Los Angeles: Sina Publications, 2008).

[15]The last chapter is believed to have been written just before the author's death in 1969, and in any case after the 1967 war. Most Iranian leftists radically changed their view of Israel after this war, as in their eyes it turned Israel from a potential ally of the Third World into a colonialist power. See Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *The Israeli Republic*, trans. Samuel Thrope (New York: Restless Books, 2013).