

Religious Minorities in Iran: Baha'is, Jews, and the Islamic State

Sarah Oliai

Michigan State University

Introduction

The 1979 Islamic Revolution ushered in a new way of constructing the Iranian nation-state. The state was no longer defined in terms of its connections to its ancient empires and monarchical past; rather the new regime sought to define Iran as a national community united under Shi'a Islamic principles. In this new national construction, Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini and the leading clerics' understanding of Shi'ism were incorporated within a new government structure to form the Islamic Republic of Iran and establish Islam as the state's official religion.

While the vast majority (89%) of Iran's population is Shi'a ("The World Factbook: Iran" 2010), the institutionalization of Islam has significantly affected Iran's religious minority communities. The Iranian constitution recognizes Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism as the only protected minority religions, but the

experiences of the Baha'i and Jewish communities have been especially unique considering their relationships to the Islamic state. Although there is significant scholarship about the impact of the Islamic Revolution on Iranian women, far less prominent work focuses on the Revolution's effects on Iranian religious minority groups. Meanwhile, the persecution these groups face only intensifies. The discrimination faced by these specific groups is best understood in terms of the challenges that they pose to the authenticity of the Islamic state and its vision of the Islamic Iranian nation-state.

Iran's Established Islamic Identity

The Shi'a Islamic national identity is constructed within the Iranian state through the Islamic government. Iran's highly complex theocracy "mixes elements of both civic and exclusionary nationalist traditions" and the state defines national membership by its members' willingness to "accept the rule of the supreme jurispudent and to be subordinate to the apparatus of Islamic law" (Cole 2005, 128). National identity and belonging within the Iranian nation is conditional on accepting the Islamic state as the ultimate authority. One of the primary ways that this religious authority is built into the nation-state's structure is through Ayatollah Khomeini's concept of *velayat-e faqih*, the rule by the Islamic jurispudents and the basis of the Supreme Leader's position within the Iranian government. Khomeini was the first to argue that in the absence of the Twelfth Imam (the Mahdi), religious scholars and especially the jurists among them should serve as the political leaders for the community in addition to providing religious guidance (Dorraj et. al. 2008, 510). He justifies this position by arguing that there is no distinction between religion and politics in Islam (Dorraj et. al. 2008, 510). Toward the end of Khomeini's life when the issue of determining a suitable successor came to light, Khomeini accommodated Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's lack of religious credentials by refining his argument about *velayat-e faqih*. Under his new interpretation of the concept, Khomeini argued that while clerical rule is desirable, those in the clergy more knowledgeable in the economic, social, and political

arenas should rule instead of clerics solely knowledgeable in religious scholarship (Dorraj et. al. 2008, 512).

Efforts to limit the role of the clerics within the government have been made but thus far have not materialized into meaningful changes. Former president Ayatollah Mohammad Khatami attempted to change the constitution in order to increase the powers of the presidency, but such efforts were effectively shut down by the Khamenei and his supporters (Aramesh 2010). Recently, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's cabinet has called for a curtailment of the Expediency Council, chaired since its establishment in 1988 by his largest political rival, Ayatollah Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (Aramesh 2010). The Expediency Council's main duties are to reconcile differences between the Majles (parliament) and the Guardian Council (the council comprised of 12 clerics who must approve legislation and vet presidential, parliamentary, and Assembly of Experts candidates ("Iran: Who Holds the Power?" 2010)), as well as to provide advice to the Supreme Leader. Although Khamenei has not yet declared a definite position regarding changes to the constitution, "major factions within the ruling conservative coalition are strongly opposed to any constitutional changes" (Aramesh 2010).

In addition to Khomeini's principle of clerical rule, the constitution of the Islamic Republic is an extremely important document for examining the place of religious minorities in a nation that defines itself and its borders in religious terms. The Iranian constitution "clearly marks the ideology of the state with respect to notions of citizenship; nationality; religious minorities, including non-Shi'a Muslims; and what it means to be Iranian" (Price 2005, 310). At the time of the 1979 Revolution, Iran's population was 93% Shi'a, 5% Sunni, and 2% others; the largest non-Islamic communities remain the Baha'i, Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Christian groups (Price 2005, 310). Despite non-Shi'a Muslims comprising a very small percentage of the country's population (7% total), four (5%) of the 73 total representatives that drafted the Islamic Republic's constitution were from non-Muslim groups, excluding the Baha'is (Price 2005, 311). Fifty-five representatives (75% of total

representatives) were clergy members and over 50 were members of the Islamic Republican Party (Price 2005, 311).

Islamic National Construction through the Constitution

The Iranian constitution first asserts Shi'a Islam as the framework with which to construct the nation through several articles in the constitution that state the supremacy of Islam, establishing it as the official religion of the state. Of the initial constitutional articles, the first and the fourth are most important in clearly establishing Shi'a Islam and Islamic law as the government and legal system to be followed by the new Islamic state. The first article states that "the form of government in Iran is that of an Islamic Republic," followed by the fourth article's declaration that all laws and regulations must be based on Islamic criteria establishing the Guardian Council as the judges in such matters ("Islamic Republic of Iran Government Constitution" 2010). These two articles illustrate the implementation of Khomeini's argument regarding the complete lack of separation between religion and state in government. Article 12 specifically identifies which school of Islam will be followed by the state as the Twelver Jafari School of Shi'a Islam while also recognizing the rights of followers of many other schools of Islam within the state as well.

The constitution goes further in its establishment of Shi'a Islam as the official state religion and basis for its legal code; the constitution explicitly recognizes its importance to the formation of national identity. Article 11 is most important in this regard, stating that "all Muslims form a single nation, and the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has the duty of formulating its general policies" ("Islamic Republic of Iran Government Constitution" 2010). The implications for national identity are made clear within this article. The state is to be a community of Muslims, specifically Shi'a, whose membership and acceptance within this nation and its borders is to be determined by acceptance of this understanding of Islam. The oaths taken by specific members of government as stated in the constitution also construct national borders and reinforce Islam's supremacy within the nation-state. Article 67 details the oath

taken by Majles representatives. Although the four Majles representatives of the recognized religious minority groups swear the oath on their own holy books, part of the representatives' oath as representatives includes swearing to protect the sanctity of Islam and guard the accomplishments and foundations of the Islamic Republic. The oath of the directly-elected president includes swearing to guard the official religion of the country.

One of the tools through which the government can assert its authority is the military apparatus, and it is used by the Islamic regime to enforce its ideal vision of Iranian national identity. Article 144 delegates this authority to the Islamic army with the duty of protecting the Islamic state. No religious minorities are exempt from the 18 months of mandatory military service for men, but the law still reproduces societal discrimination within the military's structure, forbidding "non-Muslims from holding officer positions over Muslims" ("Iran" 2010). Though college-educated members of recognized religious minorities can serve as officers during their mandatory military service, they cannot become career military officers. ("Iran" 2010).

Iran's constitution also directly addresses the topic of minority religions. There are several specific constitutional provisions about certain religious communities in Iran. Article 13 explicitly recognizing Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews as the only recognized religious minorities in Iran able to "perform their own religious rites, and to act according to their own canon in personal matters and religious education" ("Islamic Republic of Iran Government Constitution" 2010). Article 14 goes on to state that Iran and its Muslims must treat all non-Muslims in accordance with "ethical norms and the principles of Islamic justice and equity," but adds the caveat of only doing so for those who "refrain from engaging in conspiracy or activity against Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran" ("Islamic Republic of Iran Government Constitution" 2010). Despite the universal recognition of rights for all citizens, many of the non-Muslims that were persecuted by the state had charges of conspiracy leveled against them.

The formation of political and religious groups is addressed in Article 26. The article allows for specifically recognized minorities to form such groups, provided that they do not violate principles of “independence, freedom, national unity, the criteria of Islam, or the basis of the Islamic Republic” (“Islamic Republic of Iran Government Constitution” 2010). The final article of the constitution that directly addresses religious minorities and their place within the Iranian state is Article 64, detailing the division of Majles representatives for minority religious groups. According to this article, the recognized religious minorities are allowed four representatives in Majles. The Jewish and Zoroastrian communities elect one Majles representative each, the Assyrian and Chaldean Christians jointly elect a single representative, and the Armenian Christians elect their own representative.

General Policies towards Recognized Religious Minorities

Despite the constitutional recognition that these recognized religious authorities receive in Iran, this rhetoric underscores the implications of living under the Islamic regime, which became clear during the regime’s early years. In 1980, Ayatollah Allameh Yahya Nuri argued that “an individual’s geographical, national, ethnic, or linguistic background” was not important; as long as “they share[d] the beliefs of Islam,” there would be no discrimination (Sanasarian 2000, 30). Despite the legal recognition of specific minority religious groups, not adhering to Shi’a Islam became grounds for discrimination in the Islamic state (Sanasarian 2000, 30), and these inequalities continue in Iranian jurisprudence today. In 1981, the Majles were presented with the Islamic penal code and despite widespread criticism by Iranian religious minorities, the code was approved in 1982 (Price 2005, 311). In its classification of crimes and their punishments, the code places greater severity on non-Muslims as well as crimes and/or interactions occurring between Muslims and non-Muslims (Price 2005, 311). Examples include significant differences in sentencing for murder and adultery between men and women of different faiths (Sanasarian 2000, 25), the greater severity of capital punishment applied to non-Muslim offenders, as well as

the required amounts of financial compensation for various crimes (Sanasarian 2000, 132-133).

In light of constitutional articles 13 and 26, recognized religious minorities are allowed to assemble and manage their own, smaller courts for addressing family matters, personal disputes, marriage, divorce, and inheritance (Sanasarian 2000, 312). However, the Islamic regime maintains its hegemony in this sphere of civil life as well. These courts and their rulings are subject to supervision and final approval by the Islamic state authorities. Committees comprised of recognized religious minorities make decisions regarding marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance, but the final decisions are determined by the state agency in charge of the particular case (Sanasarian 2000, 75). While the decisions of these committees are generally upheld, the role of the Islamic state as the final arbiter in the recognized minority religions' separate courts seems to directly oppose Article 13's provisions for free practice of these recognized religions; in reality, the article's phrasing "within the limits of the law" curtails such practice.

Disputes between Muslims and non-Muslims are only addressed in Islamic courts, placing the non-Muslims at a disadvantaged because of the legal system's differential treatment of each group (Price 2005, 312). Recognized religious minority groups are encouraged to convert to Shi'a Islam, and if one family member does so, he or she inherits all of the property of his or her non-Muslim relatives (Price 2005, 312). Furthermore, due to the concept of the *velayat-e faqih* and the position of the Supreme Leader within the government as the highest religious and political authority in the state, the Supreme Leader's authority is considered divine; therefore, no aspect of legislation or state practice contrary to his ruling or religious opinion can be implemented (Alexander and Hoenig 2008, 13).

Supervision by the regime is not limited only to minority courts. The regime still asserts its authority over recognized religious minorities by controlling their ceremonies and public gatherings. Recognized religious minorities are allowed to have their religious ceremonies but government officials must be notified ahead of time

and speeches to public gatherings must be submitted in advance to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance for approval (Sanasarian 2000, 74). Speeches in languages other than Persian must also be submitted with the original text as well as a Persian translation to the Ministry's Department of Religious Minorities for approval (Sanasarian 2000, 74). Even something as simple as annual calendars marking religious holidays and events must be reviewed by the Ministry's Department of Publications for approval prior to distribution. Proselytizing of any sort within these documents is also prohibited (Sanasarian 2000, 74). These myriad requirements exist for religious minority groups and serve as yet another means of curtailing rights and the practice of recognized minority religions; such encompassing requirements are not applied to practitioners of Shi'a Islam.

The state also exerts its domination over religious minorities in the sphere of education. Recognized religious minorities are allowed to have their own religious schools, and Jewish communities have schools that teach Hebrew (Vivier-Muresan 2007, 600). Despite these legal rights, recognized religious minorities often find them to be significantly undermined by government policies enforced in contradiction to these rights. In 1981, the Ministry of Education and Training (MET) determined that religious education must be taught in Persian, a single religious textbook written by MET must be used in the classroom, schools must request special permission for conducting any secular and religious ceremonies, and female students and teachers must observe Islamic dress codes (Sanasarian 2000, 80). The MET's book, *Religious Studies Specifically for Religious Minorities: Jews, Zoroastrians, Christians*, was to be used in the single religion course offered by minority groups' schools; this course was to be taught by a Muslim teacher for a minimum of three hours per week (Sanasarian 2000, 82).

Religion classes were not the only classes where the state chose special textbooks and curriculum. In addition to the special religious text, "non-Muslim students read the same texts used by Muslim students throughout the nation...textbooks were agents of socialization for the new generation, with the goal of forming a 'new

Islamic person' in Iran" (Sanasarian 2000, 83). In order to gain entrance to universities, all students, including recognized religious minorities, must pass an examination in Islamic theology and obtain approval from the MET on their moral conduct and qualifications (Sanasarian 2000, 83). Students were graded by their Muslim principals who sometimes abused this role (Sanasarian 2000, 84). The exams were especially difficult for non-Muslim students in competition with their Muslim peers as well as their instructors' evaluations, and while "minority students continued to attend universities and major in various fields, their numbers compared to the pre-revolutionary era went down considerably" (Sanasarian 2000, 84).

Restrictions on religious educational institutions only increased. In 1983, several significant changes occurred that served to further reduce the freedoms of these recognized religious minority schools (Sanasarian 2000, 77). First, there was widespread appointment of Muslim principals, teachers, and clerics to minority religious schools. Secondly, there was significant teaching time reduction or complete elimination of languages other than Persian within the classroom. Finally, interference in the actual teaching of minority religions became even more overt. The end result of these and similar policies is that religious minority children became both direct and indirect targets of socialization and Islamic proselytizing (Sanasarian 2000, 83). Viewed as transients on their way to becoming Muslims rather than being fully allowed to maintain and practice their religious beliefs, "the role of a theocracy [became] to facilitate this change, gradually, while maintaining their rights as the respected and protected People of the Book" (Sanasarian 2000, 83).

The Baha'i Experience in Post-Revolutionary Iran

The Baha'i faith, based on the teachings of the Bab and Bahauallah, was established with Bahauallah's revelation in 1863; its administrative system was implemented while Shoghi Effendi, Bahauallah's eldest grandson, served as the faith's guardian between 1921 and 1957 (Dorraj et. al. 2008, 61). Prior to the 1979 Iranian revolution, there were an estimated 150,000 to 300,000 Baha'is in Iran (Price 2005,

319). As of 2008, it is estimated that there approximately five million Baha'is worldwide, about 300,000 living in Iran alone (Dorraji et. al. 2008, 61).

Since its foundation, the Baha'i experience in Iran has been characterized by severe repression which was intensified with the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Baha'is are not a recognized religious minority, and the Islamic government continued this poor treatment of Baha'is through systematic discrimination and persecution. In a 1983 interview, Iranian Prosecutor General Seyyed Hossien Musavi Tabrizi definitively stated that "any organized Baha'i activity was against the law" (Sanasarian 2000, 119). Furthermore, the Hojjatieh Society, of which Ahmadinejad is a member, is one of the most important actors against Iranian Baha'is to this day. Originally founded in the 1950s, the organization identified the eradication of the Baha'i faith as one of its central goals (Dorraji et. al. 2008, 62). The group is a strong supporter of the private sector businesses and free trade, and its members are "religious fundamentalists with a strong anti-Baha'i and anti-Communist stand" (Sanasarian 2000, 120). Hojjatieh members infiltrated Baha'i groups and organizations, gaining access to Baha'i registration books and confidential correspondences. Their actions, coupled with similar information obtained from SAVAK, resulted in sweeping arrests and executions of Iranian Baha'is after the Revolution (Sanasarian 2000, 120).

Of such arrests and executions, those of Mihdi Anvari and Hidayatu'llah Dihqani in Shiraz on March 17, 1981, are especially significant. The two men were charged with collaborating with Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, espionage activities on Israel's behalf, and complicity in plots against the Islamic Republic (Nash 1982, 115-116). The guilty verdict and subsequent executions of these two men became the first time that membership in Baha'i organizations and institutions was made a capital offense; the precedent set by this case has been followed in subsequent cases (Nash 1982, 115-116). Violent actions were also taken against the Baha'i community's leadership. On August 21, 1980, all nine Baha'i National Spiritual Assembly of Iran members were arrested by Revolutionary Guards

and disappeared (Sanasarian 2000, 116). In accordance with Baha'i rules, nine more leaders were elected, eight of whom were later arrested on December 13, 1981; these eight were secretly executed two weeks later (Sanasarian 2000, 116).

The Islamic Republic and its fundamentalist supporters lashed out in other ways against the Baha'i community as well. One of the most significant actions against the community was the destruction of the House of Bab in Shiraz, the holiest Baha'i site in Iran. The House was demolished on March 24, 1980, with participation by the local government of Shiraz (Dorraj et. al. 2008, 62). The Islamic regime stated the incident was an act of vandalism, but Baha'is argue that the temple was destroyed by approximately 25 Revolutionary Guard members, led by local clerics who were accompanied by the head of the religious endowments department in Shiraz (Nash 1982, 76). A mosque was later build on this site (Dorraj et. al. 2008, 62).

By the mid-1980s, the Iranian Baha'i community was "stripped of its collective assets, denied all legal recognition and thus placed outside the protection of the law, and its individual members were suffering [from] discrimination... the Government still maintained that human rights of all groups were being respected in Iran" (Dorraj et. al. 2008, 88). A decade later, the majority of Baha'i "administrative centers, holy places, and cemeteries, if not destroyed, remained confiscated by the state" (Sanasarian 2000, 121). In 1993, Tehran's municipal government destroyed a Baha'i cemetery in order to build a cultural center on the site (Cole 2005, 142). Even the uprooted gravestones and markers were sold (Cole 2005, 142). Other general measures were also taken by the Islamic regime to facilitate the destruction of the Iranian Baha'i community. Some of the formally registered Baha'is were taken to mosques where they were forced to convert to Islam; in some cases, the state abducted the children of families who refused to convert, giving them to Muslim families to raise (Cole 2005, 139). The regime sought to eradicate Baha'is from all aspects of public and civil life within the state. Baha'is were not allowed to have government positions, teaching positions, formal education institutions within the Baha'i community, and Baha'is were barred from the bureaucracy, universities, and

cemeteries (Cole 2005, 157). Steps against Baha'is in education were taken immediately in the early days of the Revolution. Iran's Minister of Education at the time – Mohammad-Ali Rajai, appointed in November of 1979 – dismissed all Baha'i teachers and ordered them to repay in full the salaries they had previously received (Sanasarian 2000, 120).

The Baha'i Threat to the Islamic Republic's Regime

There are several reasons why the Baha'is, excluded entirely from recognition and representation in the government, have been constructed to be the “other” threatening the Islamic Republic and its power structure. The concept of religious minorities as the “other” threatening the new Iranian nation became institutionalized with the rise of the Islamic regime (Cole 2005, 159). In othering the Baha'i community, Baha'is were constructed by the Islamic Republic as a monolithic whole and as an assimilationist group. The group's connection to Israel, where the Baha'i World Center is located, was presented as a connection to implementation of colonial goals. Baha'ism was constructed not as a religion, but rather as a political entity created by anti-Islamic and colonial powers. Baha'is “formed the most powerful wing of the [monarchical] ruling regime and were responsible for violations of human rights” (Sanasarian 2000, 121). The fact that the group had been integrated at some level into society, albeit highly discriminated against, fueled conspiracy theories and paranoia, constructed as the internal enemy of Iran (Sanasarian 2000, 122-123).

Instead of viewing Baha'is as a recognized religious minority, a label that would entail legal rights, the Islamic regime dismissed the Baha'is as “perverted...instruments of Satan and followers of the Devil and of the superpowers and their agents” (Cole 2005, 137). In the aftermath of the Revolution, Khomeini stated that the Baha'is were “a political faction; they are harmful; they will not be accepted” (Nash 1982, 77). However, Baha'ism is strictly apolitical and the religion does not allow its believers to participate in political movements; these religious convictions did not even permit them to

vote in the national referendum to the Islamic Republic (Nash 1982, 80).

Given Khomeini's view that there was no distinction between religion and politics in Islam (Dorraji et. al. 2008, 510), it was easy to characterize the apolitical Baha'i as a subversive political group threatening Islam and the state. While nations are comprised of religious and ethnic communities, "civic nations make a place for them as constituents of the nation, whereas exclusionary nations achieve their unity precisely by singling out the un-absorbable minority within as a cultural and political fifth column" (Cole 2005, 159). In such a nation, as spoken of by former president Ayatollah Mohammad Khatami, will be impossible "so long as thousands of Iranians remain under the sentence of civic death" (Cole 2005, 159).

The works of Sultanhossein Tabandeh, a prominent Shi'a author, published in the 1960s were incorporated into the Islamic Republic's legal structure and understanding of relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. Tabandeh's views also resulted in the regime forbidding the following of religions deemed to be acting against Islam, including communities under which the name of religion is organized against Islam (Sanasarian 2000, 26). At the request of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council developed government policy specifically formulated to confront and destroy their cultural roots outside the country...[and the government must block] their progress and development" (Sanasarian 2000, 121). The Islamic regime also views Baha'ism as a challenge to its legitimacy as an Islamic theocracy. Baha'is are the only non-Islamic group to revere the Qur'an as a divinely revealed book and Mohammad as a prophet (Nash 1982, 95), but the regime views Baha'is as apostates because their religion was established after the establishment of Islam and recognizes prophets born after Mohammad. The real challenge to the Islamic Republic's theocratic legitimacy comes in the Baha'i critique of the role of clergy. As previously discussed, Iran's government structure and interpretation of Shi'ism is heavily dominated by high-ranking clergy. However, Baha'is challenge the role that clergy plays and call for each believer

to independently investigate truth – each Baha’i is called to compare claims made by the Bab and Bahauallah to his or her own knowledge and learning before accepting their claims as the truth (Dorraj et. al. 2008, 60).

The Baha’i faith also rid itself of many of the particularistic practices of Shi’ism, especially in regard to women’s rights and polygamy (Cole 2005, 132). This approach to religious practice places the role of interpreting religion with the individual believer, thus eliminating the role of clergy in controlling and implementing their own religious interpretations. In sharp contrast to the hierarchical structure of the Shi’a clergy, the Baha’i governance structure is more democratic, the role of the individual is emphasized, and allocates equal rights to men and women (Dorraj et. al. 2008, 61). In this sense, the Baha’i faith can be seen as similar to a religious reform movement, but clearly threatening the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic’s claims and its fundamental principle of *velayat-e faqih*.

The Experiences of the Iranian Jews

As one of three recognized religious minorities, the Iranian Jewish community’s experience in post-revolutionary Iran has been different from that of the Baha’is. The Iranian Jewish community is extremely old and deeply rooted within the Iranian cultural fabric, and is believed to have existed in Iran for over 2,500 years. Modern Iran is still home to the largest Jewish community in the Middle East, with the exception of Israel (Dorraj et. al. 2008, 266). Prior to the Islamic Revolution, there were an estimated 80,000 Jews in Iran, but within one year after the Revolution, the estimate had already declined to 50,000 to 60,000 Iranian Jews (Price 2005, 315). Of the Jews leaving Iran during and after the revolution, only 10,000 to 15,000 went to Israel, the rest immigrating to Europe and the United States (Ram 2008, 95). Official censuses conducted by the Islamic Republic in 1986 and 1996 place the numbers of Iranian Jews at 26,354 and 12,737 respectively; outside estimates place the number closer to 35,000 (Price 2005, 315). In the summer of 2007, members of the Iranian Jewish community in the United States offered \$60,000 to

any Jewish family in Iran willing to immigrate to Israel, but by December of 2007, only 40 Jews had accepted the offer (Dorraj et. al. 2008, 266).

In contrast to the Baha'i experience, the Iranian Jewish community is entitled to certain rights as established by the constitution.

Parliamentary representation is one of the most significant of these rights. Of the 290 Majles representatives, one position is allocated for Jewish representation, and the office is currently being served by Maurice Mo'tamed. Iranian Jews are also allowed to (and do) celebrate their own Jewish holidays, as well as Noruz, the Persian New Year celebration that has its roots in ancient Iran and Zoroastrianism (Price 2005, 316). Esther and Mordecai's mausoleum, a holy site in Hamadan, is also open for pilgrimages (Price 2005, 316). Tehran alone has eleven functioning synagogues (Dorraj et. al. 2008, 264).

Even as a recognized religious minority with constitutionally protected rights, Jews in Iran still face discrimination and persecution. With the May 9, 1979 execution of Habibullah Elqanyan, a successful former Jewish community leader accused of Zionist espionage and activities (Dorraj et. al. 2008, 261), the Iranian Jewish community was legitimately concerned about their place within the new Islamic state. On May 14, 1979, a delegation of Jewish leaders approached Khomeini in Qom, where Khomeini reassured them of their place. He stated that "We are against [the Zionists] because they are not Jews, but politicians...but as for the Jewish community and the rest of the [minority] communities in Iran – they are members of this nation" (Dorraj et. al. 2008, 261).

While Khomeini's statement was meant to ease the Iranian Jewish community's anxiety regarding the new direction of the Iranian state, Iranian Jews are still persecuted and the distinction that Khomeini made between Jews and Zionists has been lost. This support by the government for the Jewish community has not lasted beyond this single statement. Jews, as one of the three recognized religious minorities, have their own religious courts for smaller matters, but the system is supervised by the Islamic government and requires state approval, thereby negating the independence of these

courts (Price 2005, 312). The government also undermines the autonomy of Jewish religious schools. Jewish and synagogue schools teach Hebrew, but government authorities strongly discourage Hebrew texts, making it extremely difficult for the students to learn the language (Price 2005, 316).

Iranian Jews also face discrimination in the economy. On December 24, 2000, Mo'tamed "lashed out at the widespread discrimination against non-Muslims in Iran... [pointing to] discrimination in academic education, in government recruitment and job promotion... in criminal law, and restrictions on Hebrew instruction" (Dorraj et. al. 2008, 264). The Iranian Jewish community's economic position was significantly diminished after the Revolution, and fierce economic competition among bazaar merchants was used to mistreat Iranian Jews (Sanasarian 2000, 113). In the wake of the Revolution, the Islamic Republic's conceptualization of Israel changed, and Khomeini saw Israel as an imperialist, anti-Muslim state. Jews that were perceived as having deeper economic or personal connections to Israel were aggressively persecuted by the new regime. In its early days, prominent businessmen and leaders were executed for collaboration with the "enemies of God: imperialism and Israel" (Price 2005, 316). During the 1980s, substantially more Iranian Jews were imprisoned as compared to any of the other recognized religious minorities (Sanasarian 2000, 112).

The Iranian Jewish Challenge to the Islamic Republic

There are several different ways that the Islamic regime perceives Jews to be a threat to its vision for the Iranian nation. The first is the notion of *kaafir*, a person who denies that Mohammad was God's last prophet, "doubting Muslims," or those who do not fast (Sanasarian 2000, 85). Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri, one of the leading figures in the Islamic Revolution and designated successor to Khomeini before their 1989 falling-out, stated that the rules determining purity and impurity "must be adhered to by the followers of Islam, and the goal [was] to promote general hatred toward those who are [impure and] outside Muslim circles' in order

to prevent Muslims from succumbing to corrupt thoughts [of non-Muslims]” (Sanasarian 2000, 85).

The establishment of Islam within Iran holds it superior to other faiths. A person of another faith, deemed impure for their disbelief by the regime, directly challenges the very premise upon which the Islamic revolutionaries obtained power and continues to govern the country by posing other religions and identity constructions as alternatives. In this vein, the Iranian Jewish community’s deep roots to a pre-Islamic Iran is a direct threat to the legitimacy of the Islamic Regime’s power and construction of Iranian national identity. Being labeled as impure is an attempt by the regime to respond to threats to its legitimacy.

This idea of impurity was extended to severe segregation of non-Muslims, despite the constitutional recognition of the Jewish minority. This notion affected types of jobs one could hold; some stores that sold food not prepared or sold by Muslims have to display “especially for minorities” signs (Sanasarian 2000, 86). Even though Ayatollah Seyyed Abol-Ghasem Mostafavi Kashani, speaker of parliament during Mohammad Mossadegh’s premiership and a figure idealized by Khomeini, ordered that all recognized religions are eligible for employment, Majles representatives of the recognized religious minorities continuously bring complaints of such discrimination and advertisements that non-Muslims need not apply for various jobs (Sanasarian 2000, 87). Although Montazeri made some exceptions to such notions of impurity for Jews and Christians in order for them to purify themselves, these rules were based upon Shi’a religious interpretations and law, not that of the religious minorities themselves (Sanasarian 2000, 85).

Ghettos for non-Muslim minorities have existed for years. In cities such as Shiraz, Esfahan, and Yazd, Jewish ghettos are believed to have existed since the 1600s (Vivier-Muresan 2007, 595). Within these ghettos, synagogues, other places of worship, and schools were of special social prestige (Vivier-Muresan 2007, 598). Under the Pahlavis’ policies, there was greater integration of groups, and ghettos and traditional religious quarters became synonymous with poverty and backwardness (Vivier-Muresan 2007, 600). The ghettos became

a “symbol of dirt and disease” (Ram 2008, 86). With the affluent members of the Jewish community rejecting the traditional council’s authority (Vivier-Muresan 2007, 600), the religious community’s authority was seen as backward. This denial of religious authority, even within their own spiritual community, is implicitly a denial of the Islamic Republic’s claims to religious authority and governance.

With the actual formation of the Islamic Republic, Khomeini went beyond Montazeri’s exceptions, stating that “non-Muslims of any religion or creed are najess (impure)” (Sanasarian 2000, 85). The impurity of non-Muslims was taken seriously by the regime that imposed new, stricter measures upon them. Iran’s non-Muslim communities, especially the Jews with their deep connection to pre-Islamic Iran and this conflicting vision of Iranian national identity, threatened the Islamic Republic’s foundational beliefs and national construction. Constructing the Jewish community as impure is a blatant attempt to delegitimize criticism of the Islamic regime and Iran’s establishment as a theocracy.

The regime’s suppression of Iranian Jews is based in conflated understandings of Judaism and Zionism. The regime is based upon a complete rejection of Western colonialism and the Shah’s connections to the West and Israel. Although there are distinctions in the law and occasionally in the regime’s rhetoric between Zionism and Judaism, these distinctions are often blurred (Dorraj et. al. 2008, 265). Ahmadinejad’s statements at the Holocaust-denying conference in 2006 completely negated previously held distinctions. The result of Ahmadinejad’s insulting statements is that it places Iranian Jews, an integral part of Iran for thousands of years, as one of the primary enemies of the Islamic Republic. Jews still face charges of treason and conspiracy (Price 2005, 316), with perhaps the most notable incidents being the hanging of two individuals in 1997 on charges of spying for Israel and the United States and the arrests of 13 Iranian Jews from Shiraz and Esfahan on the eve of Passover in 1999 (Alfon et. al. 1999). The 13 arrested were convicted on charges of spying for Israel in July of 2000, but all were released by February of 2003. Despite their release, the arrests

“planted fear in the heart of the Jewish community, bringing its loyalty under question” (Dorraj et. al. 2008, 264).

The regime’s confusion of Judaism and Zionism incorrectly assumes that Zionism is a goal shared by all Jews, national and religious, preventing the regime from understanding that “identities are not at all uniform and homogeneous, and that Iranian Jews could very well be both Jewish and Iranian without necessarily ascribing to Zionism” (Ram 2008, 96). However, Ahmadinejad’s statements regarding the Holocaust have resulted in his re-writing “the Iranian stance not only on Zionism and the Holocaust but on the right of Jews to a natural presence in the Middle East” (Naji 2008, 157). In fact, the large number of Iranian Jews (relative to other Muslim, Middle Eastern countries) demonstrates the “non- (and oftentimes even their anti-) Zionist credentials” (Ram 2008, 97). Such statements by Ahmadinejad and his 2006 conference focused on Holocaust-denial insult and intimidate the Iranian Jewish community (Naji 2008, 157). Iranian Jewish community leader Haroun Yashayaie’s letter stating that Ahmadinejad’s comments have spread fear and panic in the Iranian Jewish community marked the first time since 1979 where the Jewish community has spoken out in opposition to the government (Naji 2008, 158). Jewish Majles representative Maurice Mo’tamed sharply criticized Ahmadinejad for the conference, calling it an insult to all Jews and a denial of their history (Naji 2008, 166). He also criticized anti-Israeli state television broadcasts for fueling anti-Jewish sentiments and leading to an increase in emigration (Naji 2008, 159).

Conclusion

Despite Iran’s rich ethnic and religious diversity, the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 has created an environment where religious minorities, the Jewish and Baha’i communities in particular, are viewed by the state as a threat to Iranian national identity. The Iranian constitution directly establishes its interpretation of Shi’a Islam as the primary identity of the Iranian nation and uses the founders’ understandings of Islamic theology to justify the clergy’s powerful roles within the Iranian government.

The pre-Islamic and secular history of Iran is not valued in the regime's new interpretation of and vision for the Iranian nation. This places Iran's non-Muslim minorities, especially its Baha'is and Jews, outside of this new national construction and significantly diminishes their rights within modern Iranian society. These groups in particular are seen to be internal enemies that threaten the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic's foundation and its vision for Iranian national identity.

Baha'is, with their anti-clerical structure and their belief in prophets following Mohammad challenge the principles of the Islamic regime. Iranian Jews with their roots to pre-Islamic Iran challenge the legitimacy of constructing Iran as solely an Islamic republic. While Jews are one of three recognized religious minorities, the extensive discrimination that they face within Iranian society significantly constrains their rights. The concept of apostasy and impurity are used by the regime to delegitimize these groups' criticisms of its harsh policies and rhetoric, and members of these groups are persecuted as subversive political actors and Zionists.

Iranian Jews and Baha'is are thus seen to be significant threats this vision, as expressed through their own histories, beliefs, and connections to states the regime deems to be its primary enemies, namely Israel. This rendering as the "other," the threat to the very principles by which Iran's modern Islamic identity is envisioned by the state, has resulted in harsh discriminatory policies by the state that continue to negatively affect the lives of Iranian minority religious groups and reveals the inadequacy of the state to protect the rights of its religious minorities.

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