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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.

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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.

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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.

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 itself.

"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 frontline 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.

"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.

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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."

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.

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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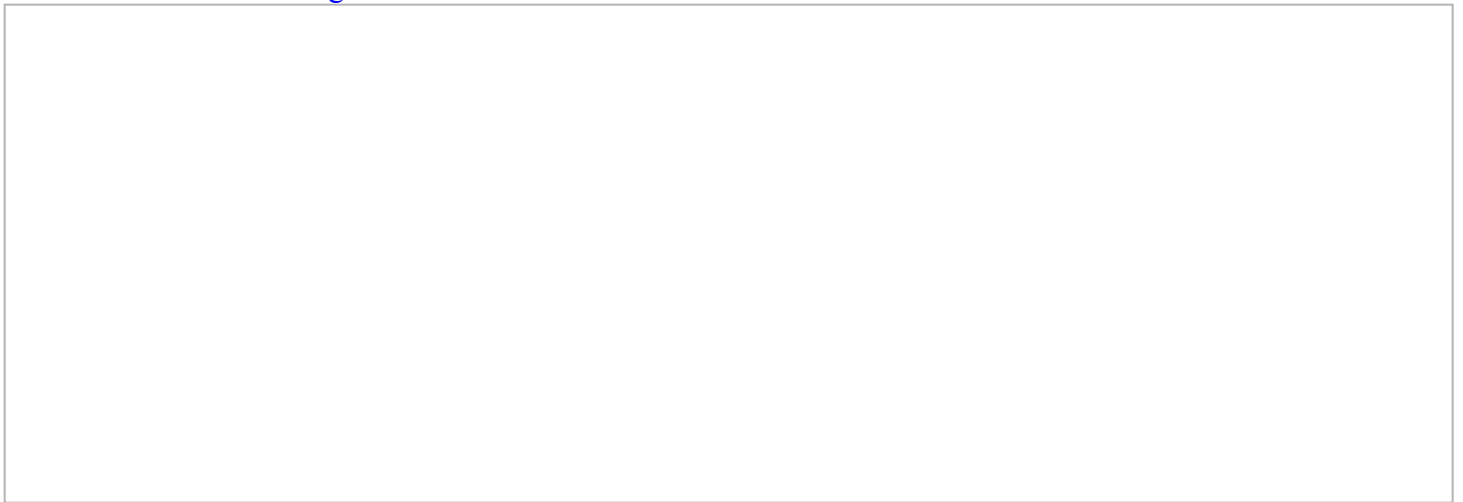
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