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## IRANIAN AMERICAN JEWS

BY KARMEL MELAMED

May 12, 2008 | 4:53 pm

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### Insights into why seven old Tehran synagogues were razed

Posted by [Karmel Melamed](#)

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Several weeks ago various Jewish news sites and Jewish blogs were abuzz over news from Iran that seven old synagogues were razed in the old Jewish ghetto neighborhood in Tehran. The [main story](#) quoted various Iranian government officials who claimed the synagogues were razed "to make way for residential skyscrapers and other urban renovation".

Always being the skeptic of any news put out by Iranian state-run media, I checked with my own sources here in Southern California and Jewish friends who regularly travel to Tehran. Sam Kermanian, a spokesperson for the L.A.-based Iranian American Jewish Federation set the record straight in [my story](#) published in the L.A. Jewish Journal several weeks ago confirming the accuracy of these synagogues being razed. Kermanian also offered me the following insights about these old synagogues in Tehran's once Jewish ghetto which shed light on why they were razed:

#### 1) Tehran's Dwindling Jewish Population

"Other than perhaps a handful of Jewish elderly residents (probably less than 10), there are no Jews living there. The Jewish community started moving out decades ago and by the time of the 1979 Revolution there was at most a couple of hundred Jewish households left. Just to give you an idea, I was born in 1955 and left Iran in 1973. I never even visited the ghetto (the birthplace of my parents), because even at my time the area was considered extremely poor, dirty and dilapidated."

"Despite the fact that these were indeed synagogues at one time and despite the fact that the area used to be a Jewish ghetto (and as such a significant chapter in Jewish history in Iran), in its current state it is in fact mostly a Muslim populated, Muslim owned area that in the eyes of a neutral observer would justifiably require a major renovation."

#### 2) Not majestic synagogues

"Even at the time that the ghetto was highly populated the synagogues there were mostly store fronts. In other words they were not the type of structures that would be considered significant 'historical monuments'. But they were synagogues nonetheless that were in full use at least up until the late 40s."

#### 3) Not anti-Semiticly motivated

"My own honest personal feeling is that the actions that are being taken are most likely not motivated by anti-Semitism, even if they can be considered to be insensitive to Jewish feelings."

While these insights from Kermanian are intriguing, it's also quite sad that there is very little to show of Jewish history and Jewish presence in Iran because of continuous urban development projects such this one in Tehran. There is no doubt that Tehran's population is booming and this land may be quite valuable for development purposes, but what a shame it is to have a part of our history wiped out even though it may not be "nice neighborhood". There will be no plaque, no statute, nor any memorial for individuals in the future to acknowledge this ancient Jewish presence in Tehran.



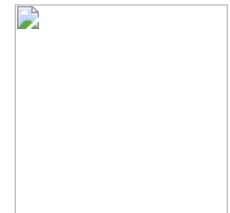
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While many Jews in Iran and Jews of Iranian heritage in Southern California may not give this incident a second thought, in a way the razing of these synagogues is heartbreaking considering the history of Jews living in Tehran for so many years. Today Iranian Jews may not know or may have forgotten that their ancestors for centuries were forbidden by the Muslim authorities from leaving their ghetto or "ma-ha-lay" in each Iranian city, including Tehran. Or they may have forgotten the mistreatment Jews through beatings they received from many Muslims in Iran nearly 70 plus years ago while it rained and they were trying to get back to their ghettos. They were beaten in the rain merely because the rain would hit a Jew and then hit a Muslim causing the Jew to "spread his ritual impurity" (also known in Persian as being "najes") to the Muslim. These were all very tragic realities the Jews in Tehran, Shiraz, Isfahan and other Iranian cities encountered while living in their ghettos. Therefore in my honest opinion, to destroy the structures in these old Jewish neighborhoods is like trying to erase the history of Iran's Jews.

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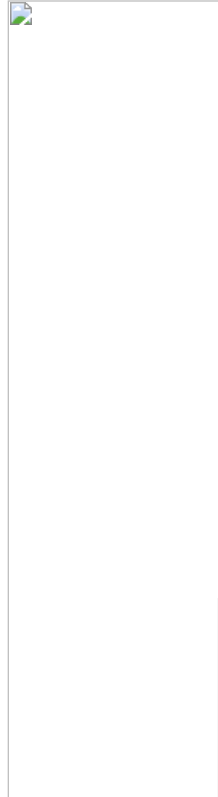
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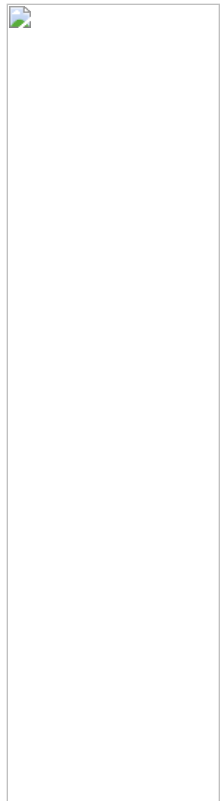
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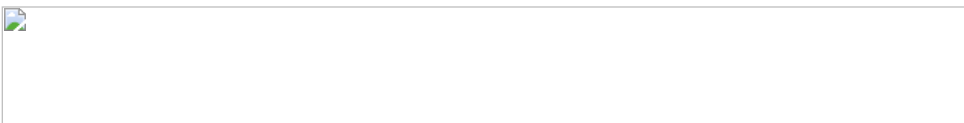
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