

Jews in Islamic Countries: Iran

Jewish Population

1948: 100,000 | 2022: 9,200



The Jewish community of [Persia](#), modern-day [Iran](#), is one of the oldest in the [Diaspora](#), and its historical roots reach back to the 6th century [B.C.E.](#), the time of the [First Temple](#). Their history in the pre-Islamic period is intertwined with that of the [Jews](#) of neighboring [Babylon](#). [Cyrus](#), the first of the Archemid dynasty, conquered Babylon in 539 B.C.E. and permitted the Jewish exiles to return to the [Land of Israel](#), bringing the [First Exile](#) to an end. The Jewish colonies were scattered from centers in Babylon to Persian provinces and cities such as Hamadan and Susa. The books of [Esther](#), [Ezra](#), [Nehemiah](#), and [Daniel](#) give a favorable description of the relationship of the Jews to the court of the Achaemids at Susa.

Under the Sassanid dynasty (226-642 C.E.), the Jewish population in Persia grew considerably and spread throughout the region; nevertheless, Jews suffered intermittent oppression and persecution. The invasion by [Arab Muslims](#) in 642 C.E. terminated the independence of [Persia](#), installed [Islam](#) as the state religion and made a deep impact on the Jews by changing their sociopolitical status.

Throughout the 19th century, Jews were persecuted and discriminated against.

Sometimes whole communities were forced to convert. During the 19th century, there was considerable immigration to the Land of Israel, and the [Zionist movement](#) spread throughout the community.

Under the Pahlavi Dynasty, established in 1925, the country was secularized and oriented toward the West. This greatly benefited the Jews, who were emancipated and played an important role in the economy and in cultural life. On the eve of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, 80,000 Jews lived in Iran. In the wake of the upheaval, tens of thousands of Jews, especially the wealthy, left the country, leaving behind vast amounts of property.

The Council of the Jewish Community, which was established after [World War II](#), is the representative body of the community. The Jews also have a representative in parliament who is obligated by law to support Iranian foreign policy and its Anti-Zionist position.

Despite the official distinction between “Jews,” “Zionists,” and “Israel,” the most common accusation the Jews encounter is that of maintaining contacts with [Zionists](#). The Jewish community does enjoy a measure of religious freedom but is faced with constant suspicion of cooperating with the Zionist state and with “imperialistic America” — both such activities are punishable by death. Jews who apply for a passport to travel abroad must do so in a special bureau and are immediately put under surveillance. The government does not generally allow all members of a family to travel abroad at the same time to prevent Jewish emigration. The Jews live under the status of *dhimmi*, with the restrictions imposed on religious minorities. Jewish leaders fear government reprisals if they draw attention to the official mistreatment of their community.

Iran’s official government-controlled media often issues [anti-Semitic](#) propaganda. A prime example is the government’s publishing of the [Protocols of the Elders of Zion](#), a notorious Czarist forgery, in 1994 and 1999.² Jews also suffer varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and public accommodations.³

Following the overthrow of the Shah and the declaration of an Islamic state in 1979, Iran severed relations with [Israel](#). The country has subsequently supported many of the Islamic terrorist organizations that target Jews and Israelis, particularly the [Lebanon-based, Hezbollah](#). Nevertheless, Iran’s Jewish community is the largest in the Middle East outside Israel.

After the Iranian revolution in early 1979, members of the Jewish community feared for their lives, afraid that they would be murdered or expelled by the new Iranian regime. After the execution of prominent Jewish businessman Habib Elghanian on May 9, 1979, was publicized in local news outlets, the leaders of the Jewish community in Iran knew that they had to act fast in order to guarantee the safety of all Iranian Jews. The community leaders quickly assembled a group of two rabbis and four prominent young intellectuals and set off to meet with [Ayatollah Khomeini](#) in the Iranian city of Qom. After the group congratulated the Ayatollah on his victory over the Shah in the recent

revolution, the Ayatollah gave a long monologue concluding by comparing [Christianity](#), Islam, and [Judaism](#) and saying that they are the only religions that are truly descended from [heaven](#). The Ayatollah stated that in the [Qur'an](#) [Moses's](#) name is mentioned more times than the name of any other [prophet](#). The discussion concluded with Ayatollah Khomeini claiming that “we recognize our Jews as separate from those godless, bloodsucking Zionists.” This was the answer that the Jewish community leaders had been looking for, and the Iranian government has kept its word and kept the Jews physically safe (for the most part) ever since this moment.⁸

On the eve of [Passover](#) in 1999, 13 Jews from Shiraz and Isfahan in southern Iran were arrested and accused of spying for [Israel](#) and the United States. In September 2000, an Iranian appeals court upheld a decision to imprison ten of the thirteen Jews accused of spying for Israel. In the appeals court, ten of the accused were found guilty of cooperating with Israel and were given prison terms ranging from two to nine years. Three of the accused were found innocent in the first trial.⁵ In March 2001, one of the imprisoned Jews was released, a second was freed in January 2002, and the remaining eight were set free in late October 2002. The last five apparently were released on furlough for an indefinite period, leaving them vulnerable to future arrest. Three others were reportedly pardoned by Iran's Supreme Leader, [Ayatollah Ali Khamenei](#).⁶

At least 13 Jews have been executed in Iran since the Islamic revolution, most of them for either religious reasons or their connection to Israel. For example, in May 1998, Jewish businessman Ruhollah Kakhodah-Zadeh was hanged in prison without a public charge or legal proceeding, apparently for assisting Jews to emigrate.⁷

Two [synagogues](#) in the Iranian city of Shiraz were vandalized during the last week of December 2017. The vandals ripped [Torah](#) scrolls, threw [prayer](#) books in toilets, soiled

religious garments, and smashed various ritual objects. Shiraz has a Jewish population of approximately 2,000.

Today, Iran's Jewish population is the second largest in the Middle East, after Israel. Although there are active Jewish communities all around the country, Tehran's community is the most significant.

Reports vary as to the condition and treatment of the small, tight-knit community, and the population of Iranian Jews can only be estimated due to the community's isolation from world Jewry. Most are either too poor to leave or believe they would be less financially secure if they left the country.

Today, there are 100 synagogues in Iran, 31 are in [Tehran](#), 20 of which are active. Since 1994, there has been no [rabbi](#) in Iran, and the [beit din](#) does not function.⁴ The city has two Jewish kindergartens and a 100-bed capacity Jewish hospital. At the entrance to Sapir Hospital, there is a sign in [Hebrew](#) and Persian that says, "Love thy neighbor as yourself."

The [Islamization](#) of the country brought about strict control over Jewish educational institutions. Before the revolution, there were some 20 Jewish schools functioning throughout the country. Most have been closed. Five remain in Tehran. Jewish principals have been replaced by Muslims. In Tehran, there are still three schools in which Jewish pupils constitute the majority. The curriculum is Islamic, and [Hebrew](#) is forbidden as the language of instruction for Jewish studies. Special Hebrew lessons are conducted on Fridays by the [Orthodox](#) Otzar ha-Torah organization, which is responsible for Jewish religious education. Saturday is no longer officially recognized as the Jewish [sabbath](#), and Jewish pupils are compelled to attend school on that day. Jewish students who attend public school are required by the government to spend two to four hours a week on religious studies administered by the Jewish community.

Siamak Moreh-Sedegh, the sole Jewish Member of Parliament, said in 2019 there continued to be government restrictions and discrimination against Jews as a religious minority, but there was little interference with Jewish religious practices. In addition, Jews are free to travel in and out of the country, and the government generally does not enforce the prohibition against travel to Israel by Jews, although it enforced the prohibition on such travel for other citizens.

[Anti-Semitism](#) remains a serious issue. In its 2019 Religious Freedom Report, the State Department said:

Government officials continued to employ [anti-Semitic](#) rhetoric in official statements and to sanction it in media outlets, publications, and books. In an October 2 speech, IRGC Chief General Hossein Salami said Israel would be "wiped off the world's political geography." Government-sponsored rallies continued to include chants of "Death to Israel," and participants accused other religious minorities, such as [Baha'is](#) and Christians, of collusion with Israel. Local newspapers carried editorial cartoons that were anti-Semitic, often focusing on

developments in Israel or elsewhere in the region.

The State Department report on human rights noted:

Government officials continued to question the history of the [Holocaust](#), and [anti-Semitism](#) remained a pervasive problem. In October 28 comments on his website and Twitter addressed to “young French people,” Supreme Leader Khamenei questioned why it was a crime to raise doubts regarding the Holocaust. In a May 22 speech and tweets, Khamenei referred to [Israel](#) as a “cancerous tumor.” On May 19, Khamenei published a poster depicting [Jerusalem](#) with the phrase, “The final solution: Resistance until referendum.” Cartoons in state-run media outlets repeatedly depicted foreign officials as puppets of Jewish control. In September a government-controlled arts organization, the Hozehe Honari, announced it would hold a third “Holocaust Cartoon Festival,” the previous two held in 2006 and 2016. According to media reports, officials and media propagated conspiracy theories blaming Jews and Israel for the spread of COVID-19.

Equally concerning is what Iranians learn in school. A study by the [ADL](#) of Iranian high school, middle school, and elementary school textbooks that were part of the state curriculum for the academic year 2020-21 found that “Jews are depicted in accordance with a broad array of hateful anti-Semitic myths and tropes, while Zionists and the State of Israel are depicted as the spearhead of global imperialism against the Muslim world, purportedly led today by America. Children are taught that Zionism is a racist, imperialist contrivance akin to other Jewish or Western conspiracies against Islam throughout history and that Zionist Jews are the enemies of Islam.”

In 2023, Jews were pressured not to celebrate the end of Passover but to instead participate in the annual al-Quds Day demonstration that calls for the destruction of Israel. Beni Sabti, an expert on Iran from the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, told the *Jerusalem Post* that the Iranian Jewish community has to show support for the al-Quds Day demonstration to “survive.” Typically, he said only a few dozen Jews participate.

A message from the Jewish community told Iranian Jews should “care about Muslim sensitivity” and celebrate Passover a week later. Another message said, “The Iranian Jewish community is separated from the Zionists. We are with Iranians and Muslims.”

Sabti added that “the regime sometimes sends IRGC or Basij into synagogues to see if they are talking about Israel or against the Iranian regime.”

Sources: Sergio DellaPergola, “World Jewish Population, 2021,” in Arnold Dashefsky and Ira M. Sheskin (eds.), *The American Jewish Year Book, 2022*, (Cham: Springer Nature, 2023).

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¹ [U.S. Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2009](#), Released by the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Washington, DC, (October 26, 2009).

²U.S. Department of State Report on Human David Andrew Weinberg, "Incitement: Antisemitism and Violence in Iran's Current State Textbooks," [ADL](#), (February 2021).Rights Practices for 1997.

³"Many Jews Choose to Stay in Iran," Associated Press, (Jan. 18, 1998).

⁴[Jewish Communities of the World](#). Reprinted with permission of the [World Jewish Congress \(WJC\)](#). Copyright 1997; Institute of the World Jewish Congress. U.S. State Department Report on Human Rights Practices for 1997.

⁵ Schneider, Howard. "Iran Court Reduces Penalties for Jews." [Washington Post](#), (September 22, 2000).

⁶[Jerusalem Post](#), (January 16, 2002); [Washington Jewish Week](#), (October 31, 2002).

⁷[U.S. Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2001](#), Released by the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Washington, DC, (October 26, 2001).

⁸[Tablet Magazine, How Iran Kept Its Jews](#), (December 30, 2014).

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