

We can no longer look the other way

Tuesday, April 26, 2011

About Jews in Iran

In my "trip report" about my fascinating 2 week trip to Iran, I mentioned briefly that I had been to a Synagogue in Tehran and that I had met with an Iranian Jew. A couple of people asked me to say a bit more about that experience.

I was interested in trying to find out something about Jews in Iran because here in Canada I hear wildly different versions of what life is like for Jews in Iran.

- From the outspoken defenders of the Pro-Israel lobby, I hear that the situation of Jews in Iran is grim indeed. They suffer intensive discrimination and persecution and many of them have had to flee the country.
- From the defenders of the Iranian regime, I hear that Jews are completely integrated into Iranian life and suffer no discrimination at all. There is even a Jewish member of Parliament.

Frankly, I was a little sceptical of both claims, and I was curious to see what I could find out myself.

It took a little snooping. When I asked my (official) Iranian guide where I could find a synagogue, she told me flatly that there weren't any. I didn't believe her. I had read in the Lonely Planet that there were about 30 synagogues in Iran and that the 20,000 Jews in Iran represent the largest concentration of Jews outside Israel in the Middle East.

However, I had understood that many Jews left Iran following the Islamic revolution. Many of them had been supporters of the Shah (who has been strongly allied with Israel) and left when he had to flee the country.

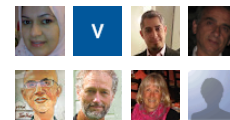
Lonely Planet claims that of the 50,000 Jews who left Iran, the majority went to the USA. It also claims that in 2007 Israel offered cash incentives of \$60K per family to Iranian Jews to immigrate to Israel but that few took up the offer, and that the offer was rejected outright by the "Society of Iranian Jews". (LP Iran, pp 57-58)

I then asked one of my Iranian contacts if he could help me find a synagogue. At first, he didn't understand what I meant. (I couldn't tell if that was just a translation problem). When I explained it was a "Jewish church", he offered to call a Jewish friend of his to find out. If his friend was available, he would introduce him to me.

The Jewish friend was busy, and couldn't meet us, but he told my contact where his synagogue was. So we set off by car, but unfortunately, when we got there, it was completely closed up, behind high walls topped with an iron fence. High up, I could see some writing in Hebrew letters.

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About Me

[Human Rights for Palestinians](#)

I am committed to defending human rights. I have decided to take on the challenge of making Canadians more aware of the reality of Palestine today.

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The first synagogue we went to was closed, but I knew it was a synagogue because I could see a Hebrew inscription high on the wall.

(How to interpret the fence? Lots of other buildings in the neighbourhood were also behind walls topped with fences. Its hard to know if this has anything to do with being Jewish in Iran, or whether its just being careful in an urban centre.)

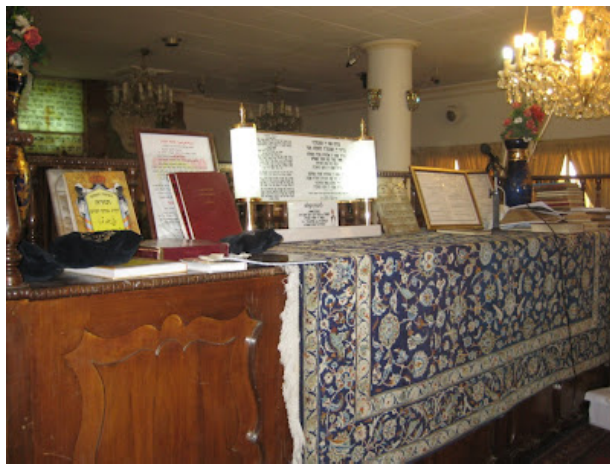
We wandered around a bit, and met an old man, who identified himself as Jewish. He said the synagogue was closed. (I couldn't tell if he meant it was closed that afternoon or closed "for good".) However, he told us where there was another one.

So we got back in the car, and after about 20 minutes of more driving around Tehran we came to the address indicated. There was nothing on the outside of the building which indicated what it was. We could hear voices of young children coming from inside, and there were a number of women hanging around on the sidewalk. After a while, they were joined by kids and headed off. The women were all wearing head scarves or hijab, and it didn't occur to me that they might be Jewish.

Eventually, we found a custodian who let us in. It turns out that this was a rather large (and well appointed) Synagogue, attached to a Jewish School. We walked around the Synagogue which was deserted. We were told there was some kind of big ceremony to take place that night. I thought it might be a good place to meet people, but our hotel was quite a way away and it wasn't clear if we would be welcome in any event. So I didn't come back.



The second synagogue was empty but the custodian let us in to take a few pictures. It seemed well appointed. I counted seats for about 200 people



The "altar" seemed ready for use. The custodian told us that preparations were being made for a big celebration that evening. (I later understood that it was Passover).

However, my same friend, ever helpful made contact with a representative of the Jewish community in Tehran, who offered to meet us the next day.

So I got to meet Farhad Aframian, Head of the Cultural Committee and member of the Board of directors of the Tehran Jewish Committee. Mr. Aframian, about 35 or so, identified himself as a lawyer, practicing in Tehran, who is also on a voluntary basis editor of the Committee's news magazine, of which he gave me a few copies in English and Farsi.

(For more info you can go to his website: <http://www.iranjewish.com/English.htm>)



Farhad Aframian was relaxed and happy to chat, but unfortunately we were very constrained by time as traffic had held him up, and I had to leave for another meeting after less than a half an hour.

In our short conversation, I wanted to get clarity on two issues.

First - whether he felt there was any significant discrimination against Jews in today's Iran - in housing, education or employment for example. His answer was that while there is some discrimination - it is not severe, it is discouraged by the government, and in any event it isn't any worse than that suffered by other non-Muslims in Iran (e.g. Zoroastrians, or Armenian Christians). He told me for example that there are 4 Jewish schools in Tehran - 2 for boys and 2 for girls, including the one I had seen at the synagogue the day before.

Second - whether his association was supported by the government of Iran. He said that all their funds come from within the community.

What to make of all this? I don't know. I can't really draw conclusions based on such little information. But my guess is that life for Jews in Iran is neither as dire as the Israel lobby makes it out to be, nor as rhapsodic as the Iranian government might think. It certainly deserves a bit more investigation.

For interest here is an article I found on the net by a Jew who has lived in the US, Iran and Israel.

<http://www.jewishmag.com/118mag/jews-iran/jews-iran.htm>

Posted by [Human Rights for Palestinians](#) at 7:24 PM

1 comment:

SS [October 9, 2011 at 3:52 PM](#)

Hi there,

There is an article by Dr. Arlene Dallalgar entitled "Negotiated Allegiances: Contemporary Iranian Jewish Identities." It gives you an academic perspective on the issue of Iranian Jews and reading that article, I believe, you can judge better.

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