

How long shall we ignore the plight of Iran's citizens?



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20-year-old Arvin Nathan Ghahremani is set to be executed by Iran's Supreme Court.



Iranian Jewish citizen Arvin Ghahremani. — Source Avi Kaner/x.

Persia has been invaded and conquered so often that history has lost count.

Throughout its long history, invaders have burned, killed, and plundered, and some, like Arab raiders, took thousands of innocent enslaved people with shocking disregard for humanity.

There was one invader, however, that Persia did not mind at all. The Polish people, whose land was invaded by Germany at the beginning of World War II, left their mark on Persian society. These beautiful and unjustly devastated people came with a great resource of modern European ways and injected fresh, modern ideas into the dull, colorless, day-to-day Persian life.

One good thing from World War II was the forceful departure of Poles from their homeland and their entrance into Iran. When Germany attacked Poland in World War II, Polish refugees went to Russia and other parts of the world. When Germany attacked Russia, the Poles became Russian allies. Russia used able-bodied Polish men as soldiers and put their women and children into camps along the northeastern part of Iran. However, war-torn Russia could barely feed its own people. So, in one hectic week in 1941, some 40,000 Poles were moved to the Caspian Sea region and finally into Iran. The women and children were in awful shape health-wise. Iran took them in with open arms. They were primarily housed in Tehran, but some came to my hometown of Ahvaz.

I was only seven. I remember going to the camps outside the town with my friends where poles were camped. Most of the children, especially the boys, were undernourished and their heads shaven. They would play Polish music and dance in the evenings. We stayed outside at a distance and watched them at dusk. Some older Persian boys made friends with the Polish boys and girls. One such young man married a good-looking young Polish woman. It seemed that everyone loved her.

They were wed under strict Islamic laws and settled in our neighborhood. The Polish beauty got a Persian name, learned the Persian language, and adhered to Muslim ways. She wore the traditional *chador* covering her head but could never get used to it. Ladies would cook and bake all

kinds of goodies and invite her over. These occasions would usually turn into small happy parties. She would sing a Polish song, dance, and teach the women Polish steps with Persian music. Sometimes, she would cut the women's hair and apply cosmetics to make them look more stylish.

Occasionally, she would reminisce about the hardships of war, her vanquished country, the loss of her family, and the near starvation in Russia. Her beautiful face would turn melancholic. At this point, some women would get up and give her a sunny, hospitable Persian hug. They would also remind her she was now among friends and had two beautiful children. Many Polish men opened shops and introduced modern living room beds and dining room tables and chairs. Some Polish women opened beauty salons, and some made house calls.

When I was twenty in Tehran, there was a famous dancing instructor named Madam Lawsasky. I enrolled in her class and attended once a week. I was hopeless. I could never learn the steps of a simple tango. Aside from stepping on her toes, I sometimes clumsily blocked her legs. Finally, one hot afternoon, after knocking on her door, she cracked the door open enough to hand me my money and shut the door hard.

I am unsure if these peaceful invaders' positive impact on the life of the old Persian society has ever been acknowledged.

Pre-Islam was perhaps the only time that minorities lived side by side in peaceful harmony with Persians. Christians and Jews were solid citizens of Persia centuries before the advent of Arabs and Arab Islam. They worshiped one universal, ethical God. Through a gradual evolution, the Persians emerged from their ancient paganism and believed in a single deity. So did their close relatives, the Medes. The Zoroastrian faith was practiced in Persia and became the state religion for a time. It was perhaps the simplest and most effective religion up to that time.

In the year 586 B.C., Jews were displaced from their land and sent into captivity to Babylon by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar after he destroyed their temple and kingdom in Jerusalem. A few years later, Cyrus the Great, the Emperor of Persia, conquered Babylonia and freed the Jews. He not only facilitated the return of the Jews to their homeland but also ordered the rebuilding of their temple in Jerusalem.

The Jews accorded Cyrus a high respect that no non-Jewish ruler enjoyed. The Hebrew Bible says: "He (Cyrus) is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: Jerusalem, Thou shall be built; and for the destroyed temple, The foundation shall be laid" (Isaiah 44:28) "Thus saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have Holden, to subdue nations before him"...(Isaiah 45:1). Yahweh himself is represented as saying; (Cyrus) will bring forth justice to the nation... He will not fail till he has established justice in the earth (Isaiah 42.1, 4)

Jews were loyal to Cyrus the Great and Persia. During the Persian-Roman Wars, Jews jeopardized their safety to collaborate with Persians. Christians also lived in the same community as Jews and Persians and enjoyed all the same rights and privileges. Persians did not try to convert them to their religion.

Pre-Islam was the most inspiring and joyful time in pre-modern Persia. Rituals were shared by those of different faiths who lived side by side, and often persons of one denomination, inspired by the season or festive activities, exchanged gifts and participated in other people's joyful ceremonies.

The arrival of Islam in Iran meant an end to culture, cultural diversity, and interfaith harmony. Islam in Iran has been openly in direct conflict with Judaism, Baha'ism, and Christianity. For centuries, the Jews, Baha'is, Zoroastrians, and Christians have had an uneasy life among Iranians.

The Koran says, "O ye who believe! Take not the Jews and Christians for friends. They are friends one to other, he among you who takes them for friends is one of them. Lo Allah guides not wrongdoing folks." (K: Chapter: 51)

Elsewhere, the Koran says, "We gave separate commands for each race; had Allah wanted all as one community, Allah would have done so" (K. 48)

History attests to the killing, raids, and dehumanization of religious minorities, particularly the Jews and Baha'is, not by Iranians but rather by the Arab Iranian ayatollahs and mullahs.

It seems that with Islam also arose the ancient conflicts between the Jews and Arabs because this hatred, more often than not, had a religious connection. There are mountains of incontestable evidence reflecting the unbearable treatment of the Iranian Jews, Baha'is, Zoroastrians, and Christians by Islamic religious institutions and the Arab Iranians.

The non-Muslim Iranians have established their indisputable loyalty and unquestionable patriotism toward their country for centuries. Iranians can name numerous Christian heroes who bravely gave their lives for the defense of their country. Yet, they are at a loss to name one Arab Iranian who did.

When religious minorities were victims of injustice, as they often were, they frequently chose not to bring charges against their adversaries. It was not until the Pahlavi Era (1925-1979) that the minorities enjoyed some security and recognition. During the reign of the two Pahlavi monarchs, the country, aided by contributions of its ethnic diversity, was moving toward modernity, and the entire population benefitted from the results. The harassment of ethnic Iranians by the Shiite clerics is a recorded reality. Before the Pahlavis era, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Baha'is were

systematically, through pressure from the Islamic Shiite ulema, denied government jobs and curtailed and curtailed their social upward movements.

Shah Abbas 1 (1587-1629) had a vision that a country can only move forward and prosper through the diversity of its people. He encouraged Christian Armenians to escape tyrannical Ottoman rule and settle in Jolfa near his capital city of Esfahan. He facilitated their transition, help built churches, created jobs, and enabled them to live in peace and tranquility. Because of this wise move toward the Christians, Christians opened the doors of commerce, and the country benefited from the influx of European Christian merchants.

Under pressure from Shiite institutions, Shah Abbas II, born in 1632 and died in 1666, reversed all the progress made by his predecessor. The new young heavy drinker ruler, Shah Abbas II, was not benevolent toward Christians. He converted his Christian mother, Anna Khanum, to 'Twelver Shi'a Islam. To please the Shiite hierarchies, he heavily taxed the Christian Armenians, neglected the lucrative commerce, and caused a financial decline that plagued his nation, and the Safavid era was never able to overcome. More and more, the life of Iran's ethnic population became intolerable.

The influence of the Arab Shiite ulema on the whole of society, especially the government, through discrimination was extremely high. During the reign of Shah Abbas II, the Muslim clerics in Kashan forced the Jewish population to convert to Islam, which resulted in the death of 150 Jewish merchants.

Before the Pahlavi era, and for centuries, the Islamic institution of Iran made Iranians of different faiths feel as if they were by no means welcome in their own country. They had always lived semi-fear, waiting for the other shoe to fall. They were always on the defensive and made to

feel like transient residents, not permanent citizens. They lived as tenants, never as landlords.

Their Motherland held them less dear than Muslims.

Throughout history, Muslim clerics have incited ethnic hatred. Governments, influenced by clerics, not only failed to protect minorities, but they also curtailed their upward mobility and diminished their sense of belonging.

No matter how unyielding their patriotism, how essential their contributions to society, they were always made to feel like second-class citizens or like "a one-legged legged-man in an ass-kicking contest."

The Christians and the Jews carried the spirit of modernity, which troubled the thoughtless Arab mullahs and ayatollahs with their antiquated Islam.

No matter how clean the Jews and Christians were in body and mind, they were always referred to as "najes" (dirty, untouchable).

The Arab Islamic institutions dreadfully feared Christians and Jews. They feared their knowledge, modern thinking, inspirations, and influence on their Muslim neighbors, friends, associates, and society.

They assumed if Muslims were to emulate Christians and Jews, the religious mullahs would lose their grip on their followers.

That fear made them shun Christians and Jews so that no good Muslim would want to associate with them. Even though the ethnic minorities have contributed significantly to Iran's prosperity and intellectual standing, Shiite institutions believe as long as Iranian Muslims remain ignorant, Islamic mullahs' jobs remain secure.

Internationally recognized as an expert and authority on Shi'a, Shari'a, and other Islamic matters.

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Hassanzadeh says, "I grew up with and understand the mentality of today's Arab Iranian Shiite elite."

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