

# **The Jewish Community in Contemporary Iran: A New Analytic Approach**

**Monica Mereu**

PhD Student of Iranian Studies, University of Cagliari, Cagliari, Italy  
(monica.mereu@unica.it)

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## **Abstract**

This paper takes a broad and novel approach to analysing the Iranian Jewish community of Iran, both as a distinct group and as a constituent part of Iran's wider population sharing its national culture. The goal was to find a new way of addressing the topic, avoiding many ambiguities, and bringing all discourse back to its starting point: Iranian identity. If we identify Persian roots as the focus and the heart of our investigation, and we establish that a cultural study of the Iranian Jews cannot be separated from Iranian identity itself, we not only shift attention to a common denominator that links a variety of topics, but raise new questions, new issues, and new considerations. The aim was to identify an analytical tool through which we could interpret and relate various outlooks on Iranian identity: the analysis led us to consider religion as the source of a common sense of belonging, in contrast to most scholars whose work is predicated on the dichotomy of "secularism vs religion." Instead, the Iranian identity discourse that emerges from this paper finds connections and affinities across the common dividing lines represented by religion, ethnicity, and geography. Reinforcing an Iranian discourse through the Jewish experience can constitute a valid response to the deep crisis of the Iranian national question and the enhancement of national, economic, and religious alliances. This paper employs a qualitative approach to the framework of national identity, based on the idea of its progressive character and related to the concept of identity as socially constructed. The theoretical assumptions expressed throughout this paper have found their empirical explanation in fieldwork that the author conducted in Iran in 2019.

**Keywords:** Community, Identity, Iran, Jews, Minorities, Nationalism, Religion

## 1. Introduction

The political and historical narrative about twentieth-century Iran sometimes obscures the myriad of micro-stories playing out all around the country, reducing religion, with the connotation of political ideology, to a fragile barrier between communities. Moreover, this socio-political narrative seems to confine the notion of Iranian identity to a dialectic between two main forces, “religion and territory,” which are analysed as though continuously in contrast. The aim of this paper is to redraw attention to the role of minorities,<sup>1</sup> especially the Jewish one, in the construction of the new Iranian national identity and to introduce a new analytic approach on minority studies in contemporary Iran.

The qualitative approach followed by this paper is drawn from the illuminating works of Smith (1999; 2009) and Hutchinson and Smith (1994), and the ethno-symbolic approach to national identity formation. This approach defined the progressive character of the concept of identity which is its historical construction, arising from reinterpretation and re-use of the past. National identity, from this perspective, can be defined as “the continuous reproduction and

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1. The terminological approach used in this work (where the terms minority (*aqaliyat*) and community (*jame'eh*) are used interchangeably) reflects the historical use of the term minority in the Persian language, and its specification in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran of 1979. The debate on the concept of “religious minority” in Iran took place during the work of the Constituent Assembly following the Iranian Revolution. *Aqaliyat*, which became the official term designated to represent the non-Shiite religious communities of Iran, is defined as follows: “*Aqaliyat* are all the religious minorities of Iran adhering to a divine religion that are less numerous than the believers of a numerically majority religion.” The criteria of distinction between majority and minority appear to be only quantitative. The term is used in the same sense in the pages of this work. For a complete discussion of the issue, see Pistor-Hatam (2017).

reinterpretation of the pattern of values, symbols, memories, myths and traditions that compose the distinctive heritage of nations, and the identifications of individuals with that pattern and heritage and with its cultural elements” (Hutchinson & Smith, 1994, p. 18).

This approach proves to be the most relevant theoretical framework for the study of Iranian national identity in this paper for several reasons. First of all, the concept of national identity that has been enunciated is based on a territorial and cultural self-understanding of a common sense of identity, defined as “the definition of the existence and belongingness” (Inaç & Ünal, 2013, p. 223). In this sense, the concept of identity applied in this work can be related also to the definition of Tsadik, who defines identity as the “distinguishing character or personality of an individual” (Tsadik, 2012, p. 221). This notion of identity has been socially constructed over the centuries and determined through the myths and values of the past (Smith, 2009; Anderson, 1991; Tsadik, 2012), in “accordance with the special condition of the time process and dependent on time and space” (Inaç & Ünal, 2013, p. 224). Secondly, this concept of identity is related to the idea of the nation as a *socially constructed* community, imagined by the people (Anderson, 1991); this notion is significant to underline the important role, in the last century, played by nationalist leaders in mobilizing these identity ideas, according to their own values and understandings of the past.

Furthermore, the assumptions on which this paper is based are expressed in the extensive works of Ashraf (1993), Azgharzadeh (2007), Holliday (2011), Tsadik (2012), Saleh (2013), and Saleh and Worrall (2015). They are related to the concept of identity in the Iranian context, to the comprehension of the dynamism (not monolith) of the Iranian society and to the definition of Iran as a

multi-ethnic state where a plurality of identities exists. The concept of Iranian identity has been identified by some scholars as problematic since it encompasses a plurality of identities: cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious (Ashraf, 1993; Ayazi, 2003; Saleh & Worral 2005). Given these assumptions, this paper intends to underline how Iranian identity has been constructed throughout the centuries and which values, myths, and tools have been used; moreover, it aims to redefine the most relevant social actors engaged in this construction and how such schemes can be applied to the specific case of Iranian Jewish identity.

When I first embraced my research topic, I faced several problems related to different aspects of minority studies in the Iranian environment. Speaking in general terms, the Jewish community of post-revolutionary Iran is an underexplored field in academic scholarship. Moreover, existing works have consistently portrayed a social community that mostly refrained from political activism during the so-called “golden age” of Mohammad Reza Shah. On the contrary, very few works have analysed Jewish history during the revolutionary period, a perspective that, as argued by Sternfeld (2014, p. 602), has led to the exclusion of the Jewish community from the Iranian national historiography.

Furthermore, scholars usually analyse the non-Muslim communities of Iran from one specific political and ideological perspective<sup>1</sup> that is linked to the idea of “Shi’i notions of impurity and on religious tensions” (Sternfeld, 2014, 603). This logic seems to limit the matter of Iranian Jewish identity, defined as a sentiment of existence and belonging, to a finite perception which is not able to exist in the post-revolutionary period. For instance, as elucidated by Sternfeld (2014, p. 602), most of the related works are written

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1. See for example: Levy (1999); Shahvar (2009); Jaspal (2015).

from a Zionist vantage point, which shows “an inability to conceptualize the transregional and global nature of the Iranian Jewish community.” Further, less is known about interreligious dialogue in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the study of which can contribute to constructing a better view of the country in all its complexity.

Another problem related to the study of minorities in the Iranian context has been identified by some authors in the understanding of the concept of Iranian identity (Ashraf, 1993; Ayazi, 2003; Saleh & Worrall, 2015). For some scholars, such as Saleh and Worrall (2015), Iranian identity is a problematic concept “due in part to the inclusion of diverse ethnicities, languages, territories, sectarianisms and religious in the modern state” (Saleh & Worrall, 2015, p.74). For most scholars, it seems therefore impossible to think about a national identity combining elements of different cultural identities, especially when religious elements are strong enough to lead to the insurmountable separation of people. Undoubtedly, dealing with the discourse on minorities, the question of identity, and the issues of a cross-cultural perspective are even more complex since we come across a plurality of identities, including religious identity, cultural identity, and no less importantly, national identity.

The specific case of the Iranian Jewish community, considered as the core of our investigation, shows how a double identity (Iranian national identity and religious identity) is combined, defined as mainly Iranian but with strong elements of Jewish culture, that is, strongly religious. The specific path of the Jews in Iran has enabled them to establish historical continuity throughout the pre-Islamic and Shia periods, shaping their daily routines and cultural life to adapt to both Iran’s pre-Islamic and later Shia culture. As Tsadik (2012) argues, the Jews, who have lived in Iran for centuries, have always been identified for their distinctive

character, *Jewishness*, which means that they are “part of one group, sharing common beliefs, customs and one religion” (Tsadik, 2012, p. 221).

Nevertheless, since the time of Cyrus the Great, they have also been part of the great concept of *Iranianess*, which includes them in the notion of the Iranian nation. As we will analyse later, after the Islamic Revolution (1979), the Iranian Jews were also able to identify themselves as one religious group among all other Iranians, sharing the same fundamental religious principles as the other communities living on Iranian soil. Lastly, considering these first statements, we cannot forgo the analysis of the Iranian Jewish community of Iran from a global perspective, trying to delineate an all-encompassing image of the Iranian Jewish community as a whole, as well as a part of the wider national Iranian culture.

## 2. Persian Roots and Iran as Beloved Native Soil

In order to overcome the abovementioned difficulties related to the investigation of the Iranian Jewish identity, I have tried to follow a different analytic approach which has helped me to study this topic from a new point of view, taking into consideration both spatial and religious identities of the Jewish minority in Iran. The primary approach consists of underlining the common Persian<sup>1</sup> roots of all religious communities of Iran. This way of addressing the topic helps to avoid many ambiguities since it brings all discourses back to the starting point of Iranian identity.

If we identify Persian roots as the focus and heart of our investigation, and we establish that a cultural study of Iranian Jews

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1. While aware of their difference, in this work the terms Iranian and Persian are used interchangeably.

(*kalīmīyān-e īrānī*) cannot be separated from Iranian identity itself, not only we shift our attention to a common denominator that links a variety of topics, but we raise new questions, new issues, and new considerations. The deep examination of my specific case study, the Iranian Jewish community of Tehran, has helped me to approach the question in a different way, which enriched my research topic and emphasized aspects of Jewish Iranian identity that the existing mainstream narrative does not take into consideration. In reality, the history, perspective, and daily culture of the Iranian Jewish community inverts the general presumption of a conflict of identities and gives us an idea of how national and religious identity can melt together and form a more intense and primarily Iranian cultural identity.

To comprehend this concept of double identity, which is necessary to understanding this work, it is first of all essential to define the meaning of being Iranian. Iran is the base of a multicultural substratum, where people with a multiplicity of different ethnic and religious identities live together and define themselves as Iranians. In Iran the sense of belonging to the Iranian nation is as strong as the sense of belonging to ethnic and religious groups and being Iranian is an element that has served as a cohesive force of unity. To better understand this concept, I am convinced that it is essential to rethink the concept of Iranian national identity first of all from a unified perspective, as a product of Iran's heterogeneous multi-religious and multi-ethnic society.

In addition, many authors restrict the concept of Iranian identity to a contemporary perspective, using static concepts and notions which only belong in recent decades. The artificiality of the concept that seems to emerge from such a perspective denies one of the founding aspects of national identity: its progressive character (Smith 2009). The construction of national identity is, indeed, a

long historical process, based on a continuity of epochs and traditions and the product of social, mythical, and symbolic processes. In this sense, it cannot be reduced to fit into the arbitrary restrictions of contemporary understandings of Iranian identity produced by the Western values of nationalism and national sovereignty. There is no doubt that Iranian identity has existed, as a sentiment, from well before the nationalistic movements and the construction, in the twentieth century, of the so-called Iranian national identity (*hoviāt-e melli*). It was in long-preceding centuries, during the expansion of the Achaemenid Empire on the Iranian soil, that we witnessed the first manifestation of a national sentiment, an Iranian identity (Delshad, 2008; Smith, 2009; Sarshar, 2011; Matin-Asgari, 2012; Saleh 2014).

Nonetheless, it is in the very early stages of the twentieth century that we can identify the birth of a modern notion of national identity, constructed on the basis of the modern nation state which emerged among Iranian intelligentsia: for the first time, the Western elements of sovereign state and national sovereignty entered the political discussion of the country. The movement of the Constitutional Revolution (*enghelāb-e mashrūteh*) of 1905–1911 ushered in the formation of a new and deeper national consciousness, influenced by the elevation of the nation state as the core of a new social and political system in the country. The slogan of many constitutionalists, which also inspired the formation of the new Iranian Constitution of 1906, was “the six-thousand-year-old nation:” this idea was built on and emphasized a “romantic notion of Iran” (Ashraf, 1993, p. 160).

This new approach had immediate consequences for the religious communities of Iran, including the Jewish one: in particular, we register a significant improvement to their status as Iranian citizens, especially in the spheres of everyday life and



social participation. For the first time, and also from a legal point of view, Jews became equal to their Muslim compatriots. Firstly, we can see this new approach toward the minorities in the construction of the new National Consultative Assembly, where some seats were designated for so-called “recognized religious minorities” (Sarshar, 2011, p.74). Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians were able to nominate their representatives in the second *Majlis* (1909–1911). Having been officially recognized on a national level, the Jews could break the chain of their exclusion from Iranian society: this important episode marked the beginning of a new period that Levi (1999) defined as the “Age of Jewish Enlightenment” in Iran.

The Iranian Constitution of 1906, containing 51 articles, reflected new constitutional themes; moreover, it was enriched by the rise of nationalism all over the world and by political and social evolutions in Europe. Furthermore, the Constitution was inspired by new principles and values such as equality for all citizens and democracy. For example, article 2 contains an explicit reference to Iranians as a whole, without any distinction, specifying that the National Consultative Assembly represents “the entire population of the country (*ghātebe-ye ahāli-ye mamlekat*).”<sup>1</sup> The same sentiment is evident in article 8, which states that “all citizens of the Iranian State shall enjoy equal rights (*motasāvi-ye olhoghogh*)” and article 9 which specifies that all individuals must be “protected (*mahfooz*)” and “safeguarded (*masoon*).” Moreover, concerning taxation, article 98 affirms that there is no distinction between citizens.

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1. Translations from the Iranian Constitution of 1906 are my own. The new Constitution, containing 51 articles, was first promulgated during the reign of Muzaffaru’-d-Din Shah and ratified by him in 1324 according to the Persian calendar (December 30, 1906). More supplementary articles were ratified by Muhammad ‘Ali Shah in 1325 (October 7, 1907).

Only article 58 seems to be in contrast with the previous ones, stating that official state positions could be held only by Muslim (*mosalmān*), Iranian-born (*irāni-ye olāsl*) Iranian citizens (*tab'e-ye irān*). This article, while showing a clear mark of inequality in Iranian society (concerning the distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims), cannot overshadow the importance of the Constitutional Revolution in the history of the Iranian Jews. The integration of the messages and values of the constitutional movement into public opinion, including the opinions of Jewish community members, especially in major cities such as Tehran, was supported by the constant involvement of newspapers such as the reformist *Al Jamal*: its role was fundamental in the creation of a new social and political consciousness, especially within the different religious communities in the country.

Moreover, the *Enghelāb-e Mashrūteh* played an essential role in shaping the future framework of Jewish political and social activism in the country. Indeed, in that period, we witness the publication of the first Jewish newspaper in the country, called *Shalom* (Netzer, 1996, p. 32). Overall, the birth of the nation state and the provisions set out in the new Constitution and related to the entire population of the country had a unifying effect on Iranian society: in this sense, the European concept of nationhood was, for the first time, perceived also in the Iranian context.

In general, 20th century Iranian history after the constitutional movement, which paved the way for the construction of a nation state related to a sense of belonging to the nation (citizenship), reveals a constant increase in the participation of Jews in the political, economic and cultural life of Iran (Sarshar, 2011, p. 68). In this sense, the social vicissitudes that have affected the country over the period have shaped the process of national integration of the Jews in Iran and have influenced the formation of national

unity. Moreover, the turmoil and disorder of the century provided the Jews with a deeper sense of their historical connection to the land in which they reside.

The effect of these new sets of values on the population, and especially on Iranian Jewish communities, was seen with the rise in power of Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925–1941). In that period, Iranian national identity emerged and was favoured due to the promotion of a unified society, including the sentiment of *Iranianness* (belonging to the Iranian nation). Together with the construction of a centralized role for the state, the policies of Reza Shah strongly supported the promotion of a strong collective identity, which has existed, as stated, since before the rise of nationalistic movements in the country. But Reza Shah promoted the importance for the newly founded state of a strong Iranian national identity, which was fundamental to the creation of a historical and national consciousness.

This idea, tying the notion of Iran to a “specific territory, a specific sense of self and a knowledge of former greatness” (Saleh & Worrall, 2015, p. 74), provided the basis for a strong Iranian nationalism which was created by perceiving and treating the nation as a community (Anderson, 1991, p. 40). In reality, Reza Shah was promoting uniformity in a country that has been always characterized by its multicultural face, trying to crystallize and condense Iranian identity into a collective cultural dimension according to a romantic notion of the sense of “belonging to Iran.” This notion of Iranian identity, defined through boundaries, myths, and historical memories, was buttressed by a policy of the assimilation of diversity rather than a recognition of it. In this sense, the demarcation of Iranian boundaries, land, and borders, in a country composed of differences, became the only criterion of Iranian nationality. Reza Shah’s “conservative notion” (Ashraf,

1993, p. 161) of Iranian national identity glorified several millennia of Persian history, from the rise of the Achaemenid Empire, and was based on mythical imagery of past Iranian monarchies. The historical memories of the past were mostly consecrated in the literary culture.

Reza Shah's new national project based on the construction of an identity which privileged Iranian over religious heritage also led to a new approach towards the various Iranian minorities which had been part of the country for centuries: it also removed all the discriminatory laws against Jews. The Iranian Jews were fully integrated into the national project and into the idea of a unified Iranian identity: for the first time, also from a legal perspective, they could perceive themselves as equal citizens of Iran. Actually, as argued by Sarshar, this approach toward the Jews was not motivated by a genuinely positive attitude towards religious minorities in the country (Sarshar, 2011), but was a necessary step in the service of Reza Shah's national project. Regardless of its intention, without any doubt, the Reza Shah regime played an important role in enforcing the rights of the Iranian Jews.

On the eve of the Second World War, the rise to power of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941–1979) spurred greater effort towards the edification of an Iranian identity based on the ideology of a great ancient Iranian past, emphasizing, more than before, Iranian pre-Islamic heritage. The Pahlavi “coercive approach to the construction of national identity” (Saleh & Worrall, 2015, p. 83), limited the notion of Iranian identity to a specific historical period of the country. Similarly to that of his father, Mohammad Reza Shah's approach to Iranian identity was built upon the idea of exclusion, distinguishing Iranians from “perceived backward Islamic and African societies by aligning Iranian culture and history with the West” (Saleh & Worrall, 2015, p. 84).

This approach, sometimes defined as “Aryan Neo-Achaemenid Nationalism,” was constructed by creating a deep opposition between Iranians and Islam, reinforcing the idea that the Arab conquest of the country was “a negative event which brought cultural and political decline” (Ayazi, 2003, p. 5). This new dimension of Iranian identity, constructed as a dynamic nationalism that excluded part of the history of the country, was strongly linked with the idea of the supremacy of one race, the so-called “Aryan hypothesis” (Sarshar, 2011, p. 62).

After the Islamic Revolution, the concept of national identity has changed again, representing a new way to integrate citizens into Iranian society. The primary tool used to achieve this, which will be analysed later on this work, is religion and the sharing of common religious values. The strategy of the Islamic Republic, while underlining the importance of religion as a primary source of identity, has not stopped emphasizing the importance of the land<sup>1</sup> and of belonging to Iranian soil, which has once again become a strong element of identity. The foundations of this rhetoric can be traced back to the revolutionary ideologist Ali Shariati, who stated on several occasions that the notion of Iranian identity was derived from two elements of equal importance: religion and Iran (namely, the sense of belonging to the land of Iran).

The exaltation of the Iranian component in the construction of the new Iranian identity (which had its roots in the historical memory of the country) was also the result of the tendency to exalt localism. This goal, while countering the emergence of the culture of globalization, preserved the local heritage and the national

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1. The use of the term “land” in this work refers to the sense of belonging and the historical connection the Jews share with the Iranian soil. The land Iran, in this sense, is perceived as the foundation of the national community and a powerful cultural resource capable of nourishing a sense of unity.

culture. This cultural openness, combined with an effective religious rhetoric, would be the main element of the new Iranian identity which would be decisive, as we will analyse subsequently, in its inclusion of the Jewish community. This attitude, also implemented for the purpose of adding legitimacy to the new state, demarcated the unique character of the Iranian experience as relating to a distinct and autonomous territorial entity with an undisputable identity culture.

In this sense, the newly formed Islamic Republic could not completely discard the idea of nationalism but had to reinterpret historical memory according to its understanding, albeit no longer secular, of Iranian identity. Indeed, in the construction of Iranian national identity within the Jewish minority, the concept that Smith (2009) defines as “territorialisation”, namely the identification of a historical homeland that is claimed as its own, has played an essential role. This identity rhetoric links the notion of Iran to a specific territory. Therefore, the Jews, who have resided in Iran for 2700 years, consider themselves legitimate residents of Iran. The land, in this context, is perceived as the foundation of the national community and therefore as an inviolable identity tool.

The question of spatiality or territorialisation has always played a fundamental role in Iranian culture, favouring the construction and maintenance of Iranian identity (Hanachee & Rezaei, 2015); therefore, the strong attachment to the territory that the Jews had to Iranian soil, linked more widely to their memories and the symbols and myths of their religion, contributed to the nourishment of a profound sense of national identity, which allowed them to develop continuous interactions with other Iranian communities, including the Muslim majority. This connection is therefore emphasized by a common sense of belonging: Iran is considered by the Jews as their beloved homeland and their Muslim fellow citizens are considered

as brothers (*barādarān-e moslamān-e dīnī*).<sup>1</sup> As stated by the researcher Delshad (2008), Iranian Muslims and Jews share the same common identity, based on their common Iranian cultural roots.

Moreover, as Amirpur (2012) argues, the strong identification of the Jewish community with Iran and Iranian culture is due to the fact that the majority of Iranian Jews do not feel that they comprise a diaspora, since the Jewish community has always been a part of Iranian culture and society. To this extent, as she points out, the Jewish faith has also become a “domestic religion”<sup>2</sup> (Amirpur, 2012, p. 384).

### 3. Religion as the Core of an Inclusive Nationalism

According to the Pahlavi concept of national identity, the promotion of national and territorial unity developed a homologized society, constructed on the basis of belonging to the Iranian soil. The two Pahlavi monarchs were able to legitimize their roles and power by combining the traditional institutions of the monarchy with a more modern approach to nationalism, one that can be defined as “secular,” empathizing the formation of a

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1. This expression quoted in Delshad (2008, p. 66), appeared in an article of the quarterly journal of the Iranian Jewish community, *Ofoogh-e Binā*. Moreover, the use of this expression, which denotes a common sentiment of solidarity and familiarity, has also been used on different occasions by Muslims including leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran. As reported by Pistor-Hatam (2017, p. 91), Ayatollah Khomeini referred to the religious communities of Iran as “brothers.”
  2. By the expression “domestic religion,” the author seems to be referring to the fact that the Jewish religion has become an integral part of Iranian culture, to the point that it has been considered a religion native to the land of Iran since the arrival of the Jews during the Achaemenid empire.

“modern civil society, citizenship and a democratic policy” (Ashraf, 1993, p. 161).

The religious element, which has been an important part of Iranian culture for centuries, was abandoned or, in some cases, even framed as an element of separation and division between people. The Shah’s secularization policy, “attempting to westernize and demoralize the country from its Islamic values” (Delshad, 2008, p. 67), seems to have alienated the Jewish community (especially the youngest educated generation) from their traditions and culture as well, and dramatically altered their identity which was now constructed from a new perspective.<sup>1</sup> The Jews, increasingly identifying themselves only with Iran, showed less interest in anything related to Jewish life and the religious sphere as a whole. The concepts of territorial unity and belonging to the Iranian soil appear in opposition to religious sentiment, which was to be, on the contrary, the major element of convergence between the Jewish community and the other religious communities of Iran after the 1979 turning point. The Islamic Revolution, proposing a combination of a sense of belonging to Iran and religion, has reconstructed a new identity based both on Persian roots and religious values.

Against the background of these first considerations, we can

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1. The wave of secularization imposed also on the Jews of Iran a new way of life. The strong identification of the Iranian Jews with their land and the Iranian culture estranged them from their Jewish traditions, weakened their roots, and drastically altered their identity, causing a form of alienation from their traditions and religion. Soomekh argues that “most of young women of the Shah’s generation embraced the Shah’s policies, which paved the way for educational and vocational opportunities. As a result, they gave up many of the rituals that their mothers had practiced, such as tomb pilgrimage” (Soomekh, 2009, p. 14). See also Delshad 2008.



easily understand that this newly proposed notion of national identity is faithful to the idea of an inclusive nationalism that incorporates diversity into the construction of an Iran that is, actually, built on differences. The strategy of the incorporation of diversity was based on respect for the religious freedom of non-Muslim minorities, including the Jewish one. In this context, the processes of national unity promoted by Grand Ayatollah Khomeini was able to integrate the Jewish minority into the reconstruction of the national identity, emphasizing values that would no longer be interpreted merely as Muslim but as religious principles (Delshad, 2008, p.75).

In this sense, religion can be identified as a strong element of belonging for the Jewish community of Iran, capable of showing us the way through which to study the Jewish Iranian community in the present period. Following this logic, while considering the religious element the core of a common sense of belonging, religion can be employed as a new analytical tool through which to interpret and relate various dimensions of the new post-revolutionary Iranian identity. This way of addressing the concept is in contrast with the works of most scholars, who predicate their research on the dichotomy of “secularism vs religion.” From their perspective, the notion of Iranian identity seems confined to a distant past and unconceivable—or unattainable—in the present. Instead, the Iranian identity discourse that emerges from this work finds connections and affinities traversing the common dividing lines of ethnicity, geography, and most of all, religion.

In order to place religion at the heart of this investigation, it is first of all necessary to entirely rethink the religious element. Using this approach, it is important to set aside the Western universalistic perception of Iran as a solely Muslim country, and to study it as a fluid entity of human and religious interactions. Therefore, it is

important to emphasize that Muslims, as the majority religious group in the country, are engaged in different dialogues with the other religious groups, and that this dialogue is possible because each side shares the same values of Persian roots and religion. In this context, the distinction between majority and minority religions on the Iranian soil appears to be purely quantitative. For this reason, the use of the terms minority and majority cannot be seen as a formalization of the Shia predominance over the rest of the Iranian religious communities, but a method of identification of the religious groups that are, without any doubt, part of the nation.

Related to our specific topic, another factor which could contribute to hindering an wide-ranging vision of the Iranian Jews is the so-called religious opposition between Judaism and Islam.<sup>1</sup> This religious element is often so prominent in the narrative about the Jews of Iran that a comprehensive depiction of them seems unattainable. But unlike the more rigid conceptions of identity, where the religious element prevails as a negative tool, in this notion the land and one's belonging to the Iranian nation assume a central role, shaping and emphasizing one's belonging to a religious group as well. Therefore, in the notion of Iranian identity there is a specific element, which is religiosity, that cannot be separated from Iranian identity itself, but becomes an important and necessary part of it. The shape of national Iranian identity during

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1. Public opinion and the media sometimes identify the relationship between Iran and the State of Israel as reflecting insurmountable opposition between Islam and Judaism. However, in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran of 1979 (article 13, amended in 1989), the Jews are recognized as an official minority (*aqaliyat*), based on a tradition that relies on the Qur'an and Sunna. The Jews (together with Zoroastrians and Christians) are considered People of the Book (*ahl-al kitab*) and adherents to a divine religion (*din-e elahi*), which means that they "have a special status because their religion is based on Divine Revelation and monotheistic faith" (Furman, 2000, p. 3).

the long history of Iran until recent years has also been formed with a strong sense of belonging to a specific religion, which helped to construct a strong and imperishable identity.

From a first analysis of the Jewish experience in Iran, we can immediately notice that the Jews easily adapted to the newly founded state: for instance, the rise of the Islamic Republic instigated a revival of the Jews' religious lifestyle. In fact, in post-revolutionary Iran, Judaism has become, for Iranian Jews, an element of strong cohesion: especially in the face of the crushing of the traditional national belonging following the tension caused by the political instability of the twentieth century, this functions to recompose and redesign their identity. After the revolution, we witness a reawakening of the Jewish religious identity: the renewed valuing of religion in the public sphere has become a key element of Jewish daily life and has contributed to the survival of old Iranian Jewish traditions and their continued perpetuation to this day.<sup>1</sup>

As Delshad (2008) argues, the Islamic Republic has created harmony and compatibility between Jews and Muslims. They have always shared a connected identity based on the same genuine values and Persian roots, but right after the Islamic Revolution they also became part of one religious corpus, sharing the same religious principles. For instance, I have started analysing how Jewish

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1. From my empirical research and interviews (conducted in Iran in 2019) I have identified a new approach to religion after the 1979 revolution. While in the period of secularization, the Jews, especially in Tehran, did not frequent the synagogues, after the revolution the major synagogues of the capital have recorded a significant increase in the number of worshippers. Delshad (2008, p. 71) states: "The number of attendees of synagogues in big urbanized cities in Iran shows a considerable reduction during the 60s and 70s in comparison to the previous decades."

cultural creativity, secular and religious, has been largely articulated according to the Persian lifestyle and the ways in which the national culture has helped shape the religious one. Religion has become an element of intensification of the common sense of belonging that the Iranian people share besides the spatial sense of place.

The Iranian Jewish experience reveals another important aspect of Iranian identity, the combination of land and religion. In this notion, the sense of belonging to the Iranian soil and belonging to the Jewish faith are combined as two elements that together reinforce the Iranian Jewish identity discourse. One easy example is demonstrated in the intense connection which the Jews share between the religion and the motherland and how the Jews of Iran relate their religious heroes to Iranian soil. For example, a common place of pilgrimage for Iranian Jews is the tombs of the biblical figures of Esther and Mordechai, located in the city of Hamadan. Another famous Jewish legend relates Sarah bat Asher, granddaughter of Jacob, with the city of Isfahan,<sup>1</sup> which is also venerated as the burial place of the prophet Isaiah (Tzadik, 2012, p. 225). The presence of sacred places on Iranian territory has allowed the homeland to become a powerful cultural resource capable of nourishing a sense of unity. The tombs, as Smith (2009) states, are among the most important sacred places in the construction of national unity: as the last home of heroines, heroes, and prominent historical figures, they induce pilgrims to reflect on the sacredness of the past and of the homeland (Smith, 2009, p. 95).

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1. Sarah bat Asher, daughter of Asher (son of Jacob), is a mystical figure in the Jewish tradition, whose life events are set out in the Old Testament, in "The Light in the Stone." In the city of Isfahan, a synagogue bears Sarah's name because it is believed that her ascension to heaven took place there.

This rhetoric, powered by an effective religious zeal, also found full expression during the war against Iraq (1980–1988), in which the sense of belonging to the land became a need to defend “sacred” territory. In this context, the common battle against the Iraqi invader has been attributed with a profound meaning, even a religious one. For Shia Muslims, this struggle was compared to Karbala, while for the Jews the values of freedom and justice were expressed religiously at Passover, which commemorates the liberation of the Jewish people from Egypt and their journey to the Promised Land. The use of religious concepts, which started from the need for defence, had already been used during the revolution: in April 1979, Iranian TV hosted a program on the Passover to show how Jews could be included in the revolutionary rhetoric.

The paradigms of Karbala and Passover, both infused with a prominent sacrificial dimension, both came to reflect resistance and the salvation of the community. Furthermore, they introduced two important ethical dimensions into the Iranian context: first of all, a broad culture of martyrdom (*shahādat*) and the duty to oppose tyrants and injustice, not for personal interest but for the good of the community. The value of sacrifice and martyrdom have been able to create shared consciousness and feelings of mutual dependence and exclusivity, which, as Smith (2009) argues, are able to strengthen the culture, memories, and shared myths of a nation.

#### 4. Conclusion

The obstacles related to a project focusing on minority identity can be overcome through the adoption of a different approach, capable of identifying the key elements of identity, which are independent of political discussions or social and religious contrasts. The goal to

recognize the elements of commonality that can explain the relationship between a hypothetical minority and a majority and the historical ordeal that accompanies this relationship, is not always easy to achieve.

In the Iranian experience, Iranian identity must be read as a balance of land and religion, two elements sometimes studied as though in opposition. In this context, analysing and comprehending the elements of land and religion reveal the link between the sense of belonging of the Jewish community and the notion of Iranian identity.

This approach to Iranian identity, as a combination of a sense of place and belonging to a religious faith, has always distinguished the Jews from other religious communities of Iran, such as the Armenian Christians. The latter have maintained a different identity of their own, far from the Persian paradigm but also far from the Islamic one, into which the Jews were able to integrate themselves because they share similar characteristics. For this reason, the Jewish experience can be a good model for understanding Iranian identity today: reinforcing the Iranian identity discourse through the Jewish experience can constitute a valid response to the perception of a deep crisis of the Iranian national question and the enhancement of national, economic, and religious alliances, inaugurating a new commonality that will encourage interrelationships and new balances..

The main idea is to visualise a new Iranian commonality. Envisioning this means overcoming the binary opposition that separates the Muslim majority from the religious minorities. In this context, Iranian identity will be read as a result of contacts, confluences, and exchanges, where the elements of belonging prevail over rivalries and antagonisms. And the country Iran will be

studied as a point of convergence between these seemingly antipodal cultures.

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