



# RESEARCH NOTES

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## Jewish 'Spies' on Trial: A Window on Human Rights and Minority Treatment in Iran

By Ariel Ahram

*The June 1999 indictments of thirteen Iranian Jews on charges of spying for Israel and the United States—a capital offense—raise several questions about Iranian policies: what is the record on the arrest and execution of religious minorities under the Islamic Republic, how responsive to international appeals on human rights are the Iranian government of President Muhammad Khatami and the religious leadership of Ayatollah 'Ali Khamene'i, and what has been Khatami's record on human rights conditions? This paper will examine the historical record in an attempt to answer these questions, explain how they apply to the current case, and review the international response to the indictments.*

### Arrests and Executions of Non-Muslims in Iran

The status and treatment of minorities, as communities and as individual citizens of Iran, will be a significant factor in how Iran's judiciary contends with the arrested Jews. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran specifically mentions religious minorities in Iran in Article 13: "Zoroastrians, Jewish, and Christian Iranians [are] the only recognized religious minorities" who may practice their personal religions within the bounds of Iranian law. Article 14 states that Muslims are "duty-bound to treat non-Muslims in an ethical fashion . . . and to respect their human rights," as long as the non-Muslims "refrain from engaging in conspiracy or activity against Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran."<sup>1</sup> Article 64 provides for the Jewish, Armenian, Zoroastrian, and Assyrian/Chaldean communities to elect their own representatives in the Majlis (National Consultative Assembly).<sup>2</sup>

Out of a total Iranian population of nearly 69 million, Jews constitute only 0.05 percent, or about 35,000, according to the Iranian Jewish Society in Tehran. Of these, 25,000 live in Tehran, and most belong to the

upper and middle classes. But Sergio Dellapergola, of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, estimates the number of Jews in Iran to be as low as 12,500, owing to emigration.<sup>3</sup> Since the 1979 revolution, several thousand Iranians have been reported executed, but only fifteen were Jews, including nine in July 1981.<sup>4</sup> Ruhollah Kakhodah-Zadeh, who was executed after a closed-door trial in 1997 for unknown charges, was the most recent Iranian Jew to be killed by the regime.<sup>5</sup> In 1996, Hedayatollah Zendehehdal, a Jewish businessman who converted to Islam, was hanged for economic fraud and espionage during the Iran-Iraq war.<sup>6</sup>

The Islamic regime generally enables people of other recognized faiths to practice their religions,

1. Hamid Algar, trans., *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Berkeley, Calif.: Mizan Press, 1980), pp. 32–33.  
2. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

3. Yair Sheleg, "Jews: a Tolerated Minority in Iran," *Ha'aretz* online ([www.haaretz.co.il](http://www.haaretz.co.il)), June 9, 1999.  
4. More than 3,000 Iranians were executed between the beginning of the Islamic revolution until 1983; see Ladan Boroumand, *Iran: In Defense of Human Rights* (Paris: National Movement of the Iranian Resistance, 1983), p. 107. For number of Jews executed, see "Khatami Says He's Responsible for Safety of Jews," *Iran Times*, June 18, 1999, p. 1.  
5. U.S. Department of State, *Iran Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998* (Washington: Government Printing Office [GPO], 1999); online at [http://www.state.gov/www/global/human\\_rights/1998\\_hrp\\_report/iran.html](http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1998_hrp_report/iran.html).  
6. U.S. Department of State, *Iran Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1997* (Washington: GPO, 1998); online at [http://www.state.gov/www/global/human\\_rights/1997\\_hrp\\_report/iran.html](http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1997_hrp_report/iran.html).

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according to Shimon Hatsav of the Israeli-Iranian umbrella organization *Iranim b'Gav Yisrael*. But Jews face particular problems, such as the possibility of arrest for suspicion of espionage for Israel.<sup>7</sup> Also, Hebrew is not permitted as a language of instruction, even in Jewish schools.<sup>8</sup> At least one of the individuals now charged with espionage was originally arrested for the crime of teaching Hebrew.<sup>9</sup> In addition, Jews must receive a special permit to travel abroad, must leave family members behind whenever they leave Iran, and cannot travel to or call Israel (although they can receive calls from Israel). Still, about a thousand Jews manage to emigrate from Iran every year.<sup>10</sup>

Armenians, Zoroastrians, and Assyrians have a similar constitutional status to that of the Jews, but they seem to face a lower risk of arrest and execution. In 1989, an estimated 200,000 Armenians, 32,000 Zoroastrians, and 20,000 Assyrians lived in Iran.<sup>11</sup> Neither Amnesty International nor the United Nations High Commission on Human Rights (UNHCHR) mention executions of members of these recognized minorities.<sup>12</sup> The most significant complaint heard from Armenians and Assyrians is their inability to perpetuate their respective religions in their own language, as the Iranian school system will not recognize classes taught in languages other than Persian.<sup>13</sup> In 1996, Abdelfattah Amor, UN special rapporteur on the question of religious intolerance, described

low-level legal discrimination against all recognized minority groups in Iran.<sup>14</sup> The extent of such discrimination is unclear. In a case of an Iranian Assyrian seeking asylum in Australia, an Amnesty International spokesperson said, "Members of minorities[,] including Christians and church workers[,] continue to be arrested[,] and judicial punishment[,] which amounts to torture[,] continue[s] to be imposed."<sup>15</sup> The U.S. State Department notes that minority groups are reluctant to draw attention to mistreatment for fear of government reprisal.<sup>16</sup>

Although Article 13 of the Iranian Constitution protects Christians, the small Protestant community in Iran is not provided legislative representation under Article 64 and is therefore not fully acknowledged by the Islamic Republic. There are no estimates on the current size of Iran's Protestant community, which was founded by British and American missionaries in the 1830s.<sup>17</sup> According to Iranian Christians International, between fifteen and twenty-two Muslim converts to Christianity "disappeared" in Iran between 1997 and June 1998.<sup>18</sup> The most recent U.S. State Department statement records harassment of churchgoers at the Assembly of God congregation in Tehran and the repeated beating of a convert, Alireza Mahmoudian, by the Ansar-e Hizbollah.<sup>19</sup> In January 1997, two visiting Protestant clerics, Daniel Baumann and Stuart Timm, were arrested and detained for suspicion of espionage.<sup>20</sup> In 1996, Pastor Mohammed Yussefi (also known as Ravanbaksh) was murdered by authorities.<sup>21</sup> In 1994, Bishop Haik Hosepian-Mehr,

7. Sheleg, "Jews: a Tolerated Minority."

8. "Iranian Jewish Society Confirms Arrest of 13 Jews," Deutsche Presse Agentur (DPA), June 8, 1999.

9. John F. Burns, "Ominous Signals in Iran; in Islamic Mideast, Scant Place for Jews," *New York Times*, July 25, 1999, p. D1.

10. Sheleg, "Jews: a Tolerated Minority."

11. Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Iran: A Country Study*. (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1989), pp. 96-97, p. 129.

12. See Amnesty International, "AI Report 1999: Iran," online at <http://amnesty-usa.org/ailib/aireport/ar99/mde13.htm> (as of August 1999), and Maurice Copithorne, "Report on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran," (UN Document E/CN.4/1999/32). (Note that, as of August 1999, all UN documents cited in this research note are available through an online search at <http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu4/chrrep.htm>.)

13. Ozra Dejan, "Historical Armenian Churches Must Be Repaired and Reconstructed: An Interview with Artavos Boghoomian," *Zaman* no. 27, January 1999, p. 20-21, available online in English at <http://www.netiran.com/Htdocs/Clippings/DPolitics/990122XXDP01.html>.

14. Abdelfattah Amor, "Report on the Islamic Republic of Iran," (UN Document E/CN.4/1996/95), Add. 2, para. 56.

15. "Australia Preparing to Deport Christian Refugee Back to Iran," Agence France Presse (AFP), July 26, 1999.

16. Department of State, *Iran Country Report 1998*.

17. Reza Arasteh, *Education and Social Awakening in Iran* (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1962), pp. 115-116.

18. "The Continued Escalation of Persecution of Evangelical Christians in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Condensed Update," (Colorado Springs: Iranian Christians International [ICI], June 1999), p. 6.

19. Department of State, *Iran Country Report 1998*.

20. Department of State, *Iran Country Report 1997*.

21. U.S. Department of State, *Iran Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1996* (Washington: GPO, 1997); online at [www.state.gov/www/global/human\\_rights/1996\\_hrp\\_report/iran.html](http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1996_hrp_report/iran.html).

Rev. Tateos Michaleian, and Rev. Mehdi Dibaj were killed in suspicious circumstances.<sup>22</sup>

The Baha'i are a completely unacknowledged religious minority. As Mohammad Hossein Ziaee, secretary of Iran's Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC), said, "According to our constitution and Islamic interpretation, Baha'is are not a religious minority. Baha'ism is not a religion."<sup>23</sup> The U.S. State Department estimates some 300,000 to 350,000 Baha'is live in Iran,<sup>24</sup> making them the largest of any religious minority in Iran. According to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States, 200 Baha'is have been executed and fifteen have been reported missing and presumed dead since the revolution.<sup>25</sup> Seven consecutive UNHCHR reports find that the Baha'i have been subject to detention, death sentences, imprisonment, and confiscation of property, and that they are barred from higher education. In July 1998, Ruhollah Rowhani was hanged on charges of converting a Shi'i Muslim to Baha'ism,<sup>26</sup> the first judicial execution of a Baha'i since 1992.<sup>27</sup> Yet, two Baha'is were killed in separate incidences in 1997: Masha'llah Enayit, 63 years old, died on July 4, 1997, after being beaten while imprisoned in Isfahan; two days later, Shahram Reza'i, a military conscript, was shot dead by his superior officer. The officer was released after claiming the shooting was an accident. As the victim was Baha'i, the court excused the officer from paying the blood money normally required by Iranian law.<sup>28</sup> In September 1998, Iranian police closed down and arrested participants in an underground

Baha'i university.<sup>29</sup> The U.S. State Department's most recent country report on human rights abuses states the Iranian government continues a "practice of keeping a small number of Baha'is in arbitrary detention"<sup>30</sup> in order to intimidate perpetually the Baha'i community. Fourteen Baha'is are currently in prison, including four on death row.<sup>31</sup>

Attacks on Baha'is for religious apostasy have come cloaked in charges of espionage for Israel, as the Baha'i world headquarters is located in Haifa (the Baha'i leadership fled persecution in Persia during the nineteenth century).<sup>32</sup> Although Iran has no legal statute prohibiting apostasy, the Revolutionary Court's reliance on former supreme leader of Iran Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's exegesis has resulted in the criminalization of converting from Islam. Zabihullah Mahrami, a Baha'i, was charged with apostasy before the Revolutionary Court in 1995 and, when he refused to recant, was sentenced to death. The Supreme Court, however, rescinded the sentence because it found the Revolutionary Court an inappropriate venue for a case of that nature. Mahrami was later brought before the Revolutionary Court on charges of espionage for Israel, and was subsequently sentenced to death in February 1997.<sup>33</sup> It is not known whether Mahrami's sentence has been carried out.

## Does Iran Respond to International Pressure?

The world's outcry over the current case also raises questions as to whether international pressure has affected Iran's human rights policy. Until the mid-1990s, Iran all but ignored international human rights concerns. In his 1994 report to the UN, Special Representative Reynaldo Pohl recorded Iranian cooperation as only "a working relationship to be

22. ICI, "The Continued Escalation of Persecution," p. 5.

23. "An Interview with Mohammad Hossein Ziaee, the Secretary of the Islamic Human Rights Commission," *Payam-e Emrouz* nos. 16-17 (April 1997), pp. 124-133; available online in English at <http://www.netiran.com/Htdocs/Clippings/DPolitics/970415XXDP03.html>.

24. U.S. Department of State, *Iran Country Report 1998*.

25. "Current Situation of the Baha'is in Iran: July 1999" (Washington: National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'i of the United States, July 1999), p. 2.

26. "AI Report 1999: Iran."

27. Ethan Bronner, "Iran Closes 'University' Run Covertly by the Baha'is," *New York Times*, October 29, 1998, p. 9.

28. "Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Note by the Secretary-General," (UN Document A/52/472) Appendix III, para. 1.

29. Bronner, "Iran Closes 'University.'"

30. Department of State, *Iran Country Report 1998*.

31. "Current Situation of the Baha'is in Iran: July 1999," p. 2.

32. Metz, *Iran: A Country Study*, p. 126.

33. Human Rights Watch, "Iran: Religious and Ethnic Minorities, Discrimination in Law and Practice," (Washington: Human Rights Watch, September 1997), pp 11-12.

maintained" in the most urgent matters.<sup>34</sup> The Iranian government ceased to publish its records of judicial killings at that time, largely ignored Pohl's inquiries, and refused him permission to visit Iran. The U.S. State Department termed the Iranian government a "major abuser of human rights" and described it as attempting "to conceal its abuses and obstruct the activities of human rights monitors."<sup>35</sup>

Since that time, Iran has tried to increase communication and normalization in the field of human rights. In 1997, the Iranian delegation to the UN in Geneva formally requested "technical assistance in the areas of prison system and training of judges in Iran, as well as to render advisory services to the NGO network on women existing in the country."<sup>36</sup> Special Representative Maurice Copithorne welcomed these requests and "strongly recommend[ed] that sympathetic consideration be given to them. . ."<sup>37</sup> In reports on Iran covering 1998, Copithorne maintained that "President Khatami's plans for a tolerant, diverse, and law-abiding society continue to unfold, and their full implementation could have a major impact on human rights. . ."<sup>38</sup> The U.S. State Department noted "some improvement" in human rights practices during 1998.<sup>39</sup>

Iran has revoked death penalties on Iranian nationals under international pressure. Much of the world's scrutiny since the Revolution has focused on the plight of the Baha'i. Since 1979 there have been seven U.S. congressional resolutions, most recently in 1995,<sup>40</sup> and eighteen consecutive annual citations by the UNHCHR criticizing Iran's mistreatment of the Baha'i.<sup>41</sup> In 1998, after the execution of Ruhollah

Rowhani, Copithorne wrote to Iran's minister of foreign affairs "to request the Government not allow the imposition of the death penalty without due legal process in full conformity with international human rights standards" in the cases of three other Baha'is, Ata'ullah Hamid Nisirizadih, Sirus Dhabini-Muqaddam, and Hidayat-Kashifi Najabadi, all of whom were sentenced to death.<sup>42</sup> After the appeal by the UN, the Iranian Supreme Court ordered a retrial, and the defendants were provided legal counsel for the first time, although they were unable to choose their representation. Unofficial reports indicated that the death sentences have been lifted in all three cases and that Nisirizadih's sentence has been commuted to ten years.<sup>43</sup> The Baha'i community maintains, however, that this isolated incident does not represent a "discernible improvement" in the treatment of the Baha'i in recent years.<sup>44</sup> Zolehkhah Kadkhoda was sentenced to stoning for charges of adultery, but he was released after widespread international criticism of the punishment.<sup>45</sup>

A clear case of Iranian response to international pressure is that of Faraj Sarkuhi who, imprisoned several times in Iran for his involvement with the dissident press, publicly credited "international support and world pressure" for saving his life after he was sentenced to death.<sup>46</sup>

On the other hand, the case of British author Salman Rushdie demonstrates Iranian intransigence under international pressure. Since Ayatollah Khomeini issued his edict against Rushdie in February 1989, the Iranian government has not altered its stance calling for Rushdie's death, despite heavy criticism by the UN and extremely strained relations with Britain and the rest of the Europe. The "breakthrough" statement by Iranian foreign minister Kemal Kharrazi of October 1998, according to Middle East

34. Reynaldo Pohl, "Report on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran," (UN Document E/CN.4/1995/55).

35. U.S. Department of State, *Iran Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1994* (Washington: GPO, 1995).

36. "Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Note by the Secretary-General," (UN Document A/51/479), para 40-41.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Copithorne, "Report on the Situation of Human Rights."

39. Department of State, *Iran Country Report 1998*.

40. 104th Congress, 1st Session, H. Con. Res. 102. Similar resolutions were passed in 1982, 1984, 1988, 1990 and 1994.

41. "Current Situation of Baha'is in Iran," one-page leaflet circulated by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'i, June 1999.

42. "Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Notes by the Secretary-General," (UN Document A/53/423), Appendix II, para. 3.

43. "Current Situation of the Baha'is in Iran: July 1999," pp. 4-5.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

45. Department of State, *Iran Country Report 1998*.

46. Ernst E. Abegg, "Exiled Iranian Editor Honored at World Newspaper Forum," AP, June 14, 1999.

analyst Daniel Pipes, “merely restates a well-worn Iranian position” that the British were eager to accept in order to put an end to the affair.<sup>47</sup> The threat to Rushdie’s life still stands today as much as it did before Kharrazi told the British Foreign Ministry that the “government [of Iran] dissociates itself from any reward which has been offered” for Rushdie’s life.<sup>48</sup>

### The Khatami Human Rights Record

Khatami and his representatives have spoken on human rights issues throughout the world. In his address to the European Union (EU) University in Florence on March 10, 1999, Khatami termed “human rights, peace, justice[,] and freedom” as “vital issues” to be discerned by reason.<sup>49</sup> In a lecture at the al-Asad Library in Damascus, Khatami praised “the establishment of constant and rational social systems emanating from respect for human rights.”<sup>50</sup> Kharrazi told the Twenty-Sixth Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers that Muslims

rightly paid more attention to human rights in the last few years. We have made significant progress in articulating and codifying [an] Islamic approach to human rights.<sup>51</sup>

In an Iranian television appearance on June 27, 1999, Khatami said Iran “cannot deprive a defendant of his human rights merely because he is accused.”<sup>52</sup> It remains to be seen, however, whether Khatami truly intends or is able to bring Iran into conformity with international standards of human rights. By some indicators, the human rights situation in Iran has

remained the same, if not deteriorated, under Khatami.

The evangelical Christian community finds unequivocally that “the persecution is escalating in spite of the May 1997 election of Hojjat-ol-Islam Mohammad Khatami.”<sup>53</sup> The National Assembly of the Baha’i report, “Regrettably, since President Mohammad Khatami took office, there has been no discernible improvement in the situation of the Baha’is in Iran.”<sup>54</sup>

Political opponents and journalists have not been protected under Khatami. The UNHCHR reported an increase in extrajudicial killings and “disappearances” of Iranian dissidents, both within Iran and in foreign territories, in 1998.<sup>55</sup> In 1998, three writers associated with the liberal Writers’ Association of Iran, Majid Sharif, Mohammad Mokhtari, and Mohammad Jafar Pouyandeh, disappeared and were later found dead. A husband and wife, leaders of the Iran National Party, Dariyush and Parvaneh Foruhar, were killed in their home. Dariyush Foruhar was the former minister of labor in the provisional government of Mehdi Bazargan in 1979. Khatami denounced the murders as a “repulsive crime,”<sup>56</sup> and Iranian authorities implicated Saeed Emami, an agent of the Iranian secret service who was protected by conservatives in the administration. Emami died in custody, reportedly by suicide.<sup>57</sup> Student leaders have also been beaten and abducted. Manoucher Mohammadi was abducted in May and reappeared five days later to report that he had been beaten and forced to sign a document stating that he received foreign funding from an Iranian opposition group.<sup>58</sup> In the wake of the University riots in July, Mohammadi was arrested again and Iranian

47. Daniel Pipes, “Is Salman Rushdie a Free Man?” *PolicyWatch* no. 343, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 2, 1998.

48. *Ibid.*

49. “Khatami Addresses EU University Florence,” Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), March 11, 1999, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, West Europe (FBIS-WEU-1999-0310), March 10, 1999.

50. “Khatami Delivers Speech in Damascus 14 May,” *Syrian Arab Television Network* (in Arabic), May 15, 1999, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Near East (FBIS-NES-1999-0514), May 14, 1999.

51. “Iran’s Kharrazi Addresses Islamic Summit,” IRNA, June 28, 1999 (FBIS-NES-1999-0629), June 28, 1999.

52. “Iran: Khatami Backs Press Juries, Human Rights,” IRNA, June 27, 1999 (FBIS-NES-1999-0627), June 27, 1999.

53. ICI, “The Continued Escalation of Persecution,” p. 2.

54. “Current Situation of the Baha’is in Iran: July 1999,” p. 9.

55. Copithorne, “Report on the Situation of Human Rights,” para. 75-77.

56. Amnesty International, “Alarming Pattern of Killings and ‘Disappearances,’” December 11, 1998 (AI Index MDE 13/025/98), available online at <http://www.amnesty.org/news/1998/51302598.htm>.

57. Jonathan Lyons, “Scandal Rocks Iran’s Secret Service,” Reuters, July 6, 1999.

58. Amnesty International, “Possible ‘Disappearance’/Fear for Safety: Iran,” May 26, 1999 (AI Index MDE 13/09/99 UA 123/99).

television has broadcast his "confession" of assisting an American and Israeli spy-ring.<sup>59</sup>

On other human rights issues, corporal punishment, including stoning and flogging, has also not abetted.<sup>60</sup> As recently as June 24, 1999, two men were publicly hanged in Kermanshah for bank robbery.<sup>61</sup> Also, in 1999, Human Rights Watch found that although women have increased their visibility in public life and women's rights have become an issue of public discussion in Iran,

the government continues to enforce discriminatory civil and criminal laws that subordinate women's status in Iranian society and restrict their personal freedom. In addition, new laws drastically restricted the scope of public debate on women's rights and threatened women's access to adequate health care, while activists were subject to intimidation and arbitrary arrest.<sup>62</sup>

Iran continues to be a country with one of the highest number of executions in the world.<sup>63</sup> Although it is difficult to gain a precise statistic on the number of judicial executions in Iran, UNHCHR, Amnesty International, and the U.S. State Department have all noted a considerable increase in the number of executions in the past five years. In 1994, the UNHCHR recorded 63 judicial executions.<sup>64</sup> The latest reports, covering 1998, found 155 executions (by comparison, Amnesty International reported 68 executions in the United States).<sup>65</sup>

### The Spring 1999 Crisis

The spring 1999 crisis highlights the questions of minority status, international pressure, and the

59. "Iran Says Student Leader Admits Foreign Links," Reuters, July 19, 1999.
60. "AI Report 1999: Iran."
61. "Iran Hangs Two Armed Robbers in Public," AFP, June 23, 1999.
62. Human Rights Watch, "World Report 1999: Women's Human Rights," online at <http://www.hrw.org/worldreport99/women/women3.html> (July 19, 1999).
63. Death Penalty Information Center, (Benicia, Calif: Death Penalty Information Center), online at <http://www.essential.org/dpic/dpicintl.html>.
64. Copithorne, "Report on the Situation of Human Rights," para. 6.
65. *Ibid*, para 63; for U.S. executions, see Amnesty International, "AI Report 1999: United States of America," online at <http://www.amnesty.org/ailib/aireport/ar99/amr51.htm>.

Khatami government's position on human rights. Reports of the occasion of the initial arrest of the Jews vary: some sources indicated January 1999,<sup>66</sup> others as late as April 1999.<sup>67</sup> Tehran Radio officially announced their arrest on June 7, 1999.<sup>68</sup> Foreign Minister Kharrazi revealed the charges against the thirteen Jews in letters to UN secretary-general Kofi Annan and several unnamed EU and UN officials on June 28, 1999. As Kharrazi described the situation,

the charges against these people have nothing to do with their religion or political affiliation. They were arrested on charges of illegally gathering information, including military information, and handing [it] over to foreigners. . . In line with strengthening civil society and the rule of law, (Iran) respects the rights and liberties of all Iranian citizens according to the lofty teachings of Islam.<sup>69</sup>

The international response to the arrests has varied from concern to condemnation:

- The Vatican expressed its concern.<sup>70</sup>
- Russia's Foreign Ministry appealed to the "humane potential underlying Islam" to resolve the situation in an "open manner."<sup>71</sup>
- British foreign secretary Robin Cook insisted "on a fair judicial process" for those arrested.<sup>72</sup> According to spokesmen of the Foreign Ministry, Britain's position is that the trial is an internal Iranian matter.<sup>73</sup>
- German foreign minister Joschka Fischer termed the arrests a "very grave incident."<sup>74</sup>

66. Burns, "Ominous Signals in Iran."

67. Elissa Gootman, "Efforts Underway to Free Jews Arrested in Iran," *Forward*, April 23, 1999.

68. "Iran: Thirteen Arrested on Charges of Spying for Israel, USA," BBC, June 7, 1999, citing Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran Radio.

69. "Iran Says Arrested Jews Passed on Military Secrets," Reuters, June 28, 1999.

70. "Vatican Expresses Concern Over Jailed Iranian Jews," Reuters, June 18, 1999.

71. "Russia Urges Iran to be 'Humane' Toward Spy Suspects," AP, June 11, 1999.

72. Jackie Storer, "Britain Presses Iran for Assurances on Spying Trial," Press Association News, June 22, 1999.

73. Barry Schweid, "British to Explore Business Opportunities in Libya," AP, July 8, 1999.

74. "Outside Iran, Doubt on Jewish Spies," *Iran Times*, June 18, 1999.

- French foreign minister Hubert Edrine called the arrests “absolutely intolerable.”<sup>75</sup> The president of France’s National Assembly, Laurent Fabius, warned that if the Jews are not spared, Iran “can no longer hope for normal relations with the international community.”<sup>76</sup>
- The U.S. State Department appealed to the Saudi government to exert its influence, and Jesse Jackson met with the Iranian delegation to the UN in New York.<sup>77</sup> The White House called explicitly for the release of those arrested,<sup>78</sup> and the State Department called upon the “government of Iran to release these individuals immediately.”<sup>79</sup>
- Amnesty International issued a public notice on June 8, 1999, that condemned the possible death sentencing by and unfair trial practices of Iran’s Revolutionary Court.<sup>80</sup>

### Why the Arrests?

Some reports indicate that those arrested will be used as leverage in a secret negotiation between Israel and Iran. Hamas members imprisoned in Israel recently sent a letter asking that the Hamas leadership try to facilitate an exchange of the Jews for the release of Hamas members.<sup>81</sup> Additionally, Iran may be using the Jews as leverage in its attempts to reclaim debts still owed by Israel for prerevolution joint weapons programs.<sup>82</sup> The Israeli press reports that Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak rejected an offer by Ayatollah Khamene’i to trade the Jews for cash, for fear of set-

ting a precedent of extortion.<sup>83</sup> Yet, Iran steadfastly denies having any contact with Israel,<sup>84</sup> and the secretary of the Constitutional Guardian Council, Ayatollah Ahi Jannati, told students at Tehran University that “those who think that it is possible to strike a deal on the fate of the spies [are] definitely mistaken.”<sup>85</sup> Iran continues to reject international scrutiny of the topic as an interference in Iranian domestic sovereignty.<sup>86</sup>

Alternatively, other signs suggest the arrests were related to internal Iranian politics. Many in the West have viewed the arrests as an attempt by Iran’s theocratic right to embarrass Khatami in his attempt to engage the West.<sup>87</sup> Khatami responded to the arrests by asserting he takes personal responsibility to support the rights “of each individual minority member who is living in Iran and [who] accepts the system of the Islamic Republic.”<sup>88</sup>

### Conclusion

It is beyond the scope of this note to forecast what will happen to the thirteen arrested Jews. The record shows, however, that even for the worst-treated minority in Iran—the Baha’i—international protest has at times made a positive difference. There is no case on record in which such protests have hurt the situation of someone imprisoned in Iran.

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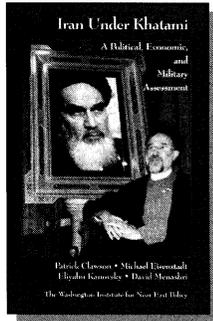
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75. “France Protests to Iran Over Spying Charges,” Reuters, June 20, 1999.  
 76. “French Parliament Head Warns Iran not to Hang Jews,” Reuters, July 2, 1999.  
 77. John Lancaster, “Odd Allies Asked to Help Save Iranian Jews,” *Washington Post*, June 22, 1999, p. 10.  
 78. “Outside Iran, Doubt on Jewish Spies.”  
 79. James Rubin, “State Department Regular Briefing,” June 23, 1999 (transcribed by Federal News Service).  
 80. Amnesty International, “Legal Concern/Possible Death Penalty: Iran.”  
 81. “Hamas Inmates Seek Using Iranian Jews for Release ‘Deal,’” BBC, June 22, 1999, transcript of Israel Channel 2 TV, Jerusalem, June 21, 1999.  
 82. Christiana Timmerman, ed., *Iran Brief* no. 60, July 6, 1999, p. 2.

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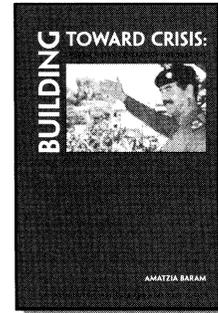
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