
Iran *

DESPITE its strategic position in the Middle East, Iran slowly succeeded in achieving and maintaining comparative stability during the years under review, from 1953, the Mossadegh-Tudeh upheavals, to mid-1959.

Iran aligned itself with the West and was a member of the Baghdad Pact since its inception. An American military mission helped to train the Iranian army and supplied most of its weapons and bases. Many Iranian government agencies had American advisors, and large-scale American loans and grants and technical assistance were provided.

Much attention was given to raising the general level of the country politically, economically, and socially. Iran became a constitutional monarchy in the early 1900's, but great power remained in the monarch's hands. Shah Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlevi increased his power in 1953 as a result of the coup which overthrew Mossadegh. With his prompting, two political parties were established in early 1958—the Melliyun party, which represented the legislative group currently in power, and the Mardom party, which represented the opposition. Artificially created from above, these parties did not have the dynamic influence over national politics of political parties elsewhere.

In 1959 parliament passed a law prohibiting anyone connected with the government from having any business dealings with it, and another, the so-called "Where did you get it from?" law, requiring all public officials and civil servants to declare the sources of their income and property.

Parliament consisted of two houses, the Majlis and the Senate. Any male Iranian Moslem over 20 could vote for Majlis deputies. (Women did not have the vote.) In addition, religious minority groups, such as the Zoroastrians, the Jews, and the Armenians, were each permitted at least one representative in the Majlis. There was one such Jewish representative.

A government agency called the Plan Organization of Iran had major responsibility for planning and directing the country's general economic and social development. The Second Seven-year Development Law established a comprehensive, integrated plan for the development of the country's resources. The Plan Organization was supposed to receive 80 per cent of Iran's oil revenues for its projects, but some of this income was diverted to the general budget.

The industrial revolution begun under Reza Shah, father of the present shah and founder of the Pahlevi dynasty, was interrupted and in some respects even reversed by the events of World War II and its immediate aftermath, as well as by the oil crisis of 1951-53. It gradually regained new

* For meaning of abbreviations, see p. 359.

impetus with the stabilization of the country after 1953. There were still glaring contrasts in Iran's level of development. Thus, television was introduced, while most of the country's roads and water-supply systems remained primitive. The deep chasm between wealth and poverty continued, and the improved standard of living in the cities scarcely touched the countryside. A slowly emerging middle class consisted in the main of small shopkeepers, white-collar workers, and professionals not deriving from the upper class.

Jewish Population

A census completed in 1956 showed close to 19,000,000 inhabitants, about 98 per cent of them Moslem. There were 80,000 to 85,000 Jews, approximately 0.4 per cent of the total population. Of these, 50 per cent were in Teheran and Abadan, 40 per cent in six other larger cities, and the remaining 10 per cent scattered through some 23 small towns. There was considerable internal migration and some emigration to Israel. The Jews' social and economic condition reflected general Iranian conditions, modified by their position as Jews in a Moslem country. There was the same gap between the small group of the prosperous and the masses of the poor, the same unevenness and inconsistency of progress, the same emerging middle class.

Antisemitism

There was little overt political antisemitism in the years under review, aside from the discrimination resulting from the position of Islam as the official state religion. A certain amount of economic and social antisemitism was endemic. In general, Iranian Jews had little opportunity to obtain employment, and almost no opportunity to advance, in government, the army, banks, and similar fields. Many Moslem businessmen refused to employ Jews, and some used antisemitic slander to attack Jewish competitors. Jewish school children in non-Jewish schools were frequently the butt of antisemitic taunts and abuse.

In spite of this, the Jews enjoyed relative peace, security, and opportunity under the present regime. The king and his various ministries were interested in the welfare of the Jews and sympathetic to their needs. Good relationships existed between government authorities and the local Jewish leadership and Jewish foreign organizations. Although there were no official relations between Israel and Iran, emigration to Israel was freely permitted, and the Jewish Agency for Israel carried on its emigration activities without hindrance. There was also trade with Israel, and many products in Iranian shops bore a "Made in Israel" label and found a ready market.

But the position of the Jews in Iran was by no means completely secure. During the Suez crisis and Sinai campaign of 1956, strongly antisemitic threats and warnings appeared in at least one newspaper and the assembly of more than ten Jews for any purpose was prohibited. These manifestations passed quickly as the international crisis subsided, but they could not be disregarded.

Community Organization

The Jewish community used these years of relative calm and freedom to make numerous advances in education, health, and welfare. The community organizational structure took the form of a number of special committees, organized at various times to meet particular needs and made up mostly of the leading, i.e., the wealthiest, local Jews. The Iranian stratification of society was based more on wealth than other types of achievement, and this was equally true within the Jewish community. Authority and prestige were therefore chiefly in the hands of the rich and only to a much more limited extent in those of the scholar, intellectual, or religious leader. With the emergence of a middle class, an occasional member of this new class, usually a professional, found his way into community activity and achieved recognition. No strong central body existed to coordinate the work of the various committees and to represent Iranian Jewry, despite several efforts to establish one. The Anjoman Kalimian, or Jewish Committee, was the central Jewish body officially registered with the government. Its president was the Jewish representative in the Majlis, and it gave promise of developing into a central organ for the Jewish community.

JEWISH EDUCATION

Jewish elementary and secondary education were provided through school systems under the auspices of two foreign Jewish organizations, the Alliance Israélite Universelle and Otzar ha-Torah. There were schools in Teheran and a number of provincial cities. ORT also operated vocational schools. In all, during 1958, approximately 10,500 Jewish children attended 35 schools in 25 cities. In recent years there was a slight increase in the number of Jewish school children in Teheran and a decrease in the provinces, as a result of emigration to Israel and migration to Teheran. Some 4,000 Jewish children attended non-Jewish Iranian schools, and many wealthy families sent their children abroad for secondary or higher education.

The Jewish schools also offered a feeding program, periodic clothing distributions, and bath and health programs. For pre-school children, there were two day-care centers in Teheran and one each in Hamadan, Isfahan, and Shiraz. In 1958 approximately 2,200 pre-school age children benefited from the day-care centers, where food, clothing, baths, haircuts, and medical attention were also provided. Training opportunities for staff were offered in all the schools, particularly in the day-care centers.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

The greatest concentration of effort was in health. The major emphasis was on maternal and child health, but through the extensive sanitation program, the various clinics, the school health facilities and other channels, the medical program reached into the life of almost every Jewish family that was not entirely self-sufficient. The health services included maternal and child-care centers, which gave pre- and postnatal medical care and advice as

well as nutritional supplementation to expectant and nursing mothers and their babies; the highly-rated Jewish hospital (Kanoun Kheir Khah hospital) in Teheran which provided in-patient facilities for maternity cases, a children's ward, and an out-patient department for all types of illness; dispensaries; a nurse's-aide training school, and a parasitological study under the direction of an outstanding foreign specialist, with a follow-up program of prevention and treatment.

Large quantities of surplus commodities furnished by the United States Department of Agriculture were valuable supplements to the feeding programs. From 1957 on, summer camps offered hundreds of Mahalleh (ghetto) boys experience in outdoor group living. In 1959 financial assistance was extended to 50 university students through the University Students' Aid Program. In Teheran a welfare office in the Mahalleh gave direct relief in kind, and occasionally in cash, to selected needy cases; relief was also given in urgent cases in the provinces, though on a less organized basis. Passover supplies were distributed to all needy Jews.

CULTURAL ACTIVITY

The Koresh Kabir Cultural Center in Teheran, six years old in 1959, while its operation and program were quite Iranian, was modeled on the American Jewish community center. There was also a Jewish sport club, similar to other Iranian sport clubs which enjoyed great popularity and respect. In recent years, in response to an increasing demand for adult education, literacy and health-education classes were provided, particularly for the mothers in the Mahallehs.

Except for educational programs operated directly by the Alliance Israélite Universelle, Otzar ha-Torah, and ORT, all these health, education, and welfare programs were under the sponsorship of the various local Jewish committees and were financed, with some local participation, primarily by JDC. JDC also provided technical and professional advice and service, help in organizing new services, consultation for the ongoing programs, and assistance in community organization and leadership development.

EMIGRATION

As indicated previously, the Iranian government permitted emigration to Israel, adopting a neutral position. It did not encourage or press Jews to leave Iran, nor did it restrict their departure. The Jewish Agency for Israel supervised emigration. In 1958 about 7,000 Jews, approximately 8 per cent of Iran's Jewish population, emigrated to Israel. In a few smaller towns and villages the Jewish community was almost entirely liquidated through such emigration, together with migration to Teheran, and in others it was drastically reduced. As a result the continued existence of some schools, clinics, and synagogues was put into doubt. The overwhelming number of emigrants to Israel were poor. However, even among the poorest there was a strong reluctance to pull up ancient roots and go to a new land.