

'Jewish spies' case aimed at Iran's Khatami

by Hussein al-Nadeem

At a time when Iran, under the Presidency of Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, has been taking unprecedented steps to build diplomatic, political, and economic ties with its neighboring Arab states and western Europe, and important overtures have emerged from the U.S. administration toward Khatami's Iran, a "Jewish spy" scandal has erupted in Iran. It has been blown out of all proportion, by anti-Khatami extremist factions within Iran, on the one hand, and by the "Butcher of Lebanon," Israel's lame-duck Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon, international "Jewish" organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith (ADL), and extremists in Israel, on the other hand.

In the first week of June, the Director General of the Information Department (Intelligence) in Shiraz, Fars Province, was quoted by the official Iranian News Agency as saying: "Thirteen spies who had been working for the Zionists [Israel] have been arrested. The elements, who were identified and

arrested, played a vital role in the espionage network and were arrested on the orders of the court." None of the Iranian officials who were quoted referred to the fact that some or all of the suspects were Jewish. However, it was later revealed that some of those arrested are Iranian Jews, possibly including the Chief Rabbi of Shiraz.

The investigation has not been concluded, so the truth of the charges raised against these Iranians is not yet known. The demand of extremist elements in Iran is that the "spies should be executed," while the demand of the ADL, Sharon, and other Anglophile Zionist lobby circles is that governments in the West should pressure Iran to release the Jewish suspects. The Iranian response has been that this is a "domestic affair," and the fact that some of the suspects are Jews does not deprive Iran of its sovereign right to try any of its citizens suspected of spying for foreign states. The core of the matter is that it could provoke a serious conflict, with Israel and the United States on the one side, and Iran on the other.

Khatami's government is finding itself caught between the propaganda from within, and the malicious campaign from without. As soon as the arrests were announced, the ADL and the Zionist lobby in the United States jumped on the issue. ADL Director Abe Foxman, in an interview with the June 9 *Jerusalem Post*, said: "For 20 years, they [the Iranians] have let the tiny Jewish community live and breathe Jewishly and as citizens of Iran. The moment they turn to the classical scapegoating of Jews, they are sending a message

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that Iran has not changed.” The Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations — whose president is cosmetics heir Ronald Lauder, the moneybags for outgoing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu — joined the ADL in calling on the Iranian government to release the Iranian Jewish suspects.

First of all, it should be borne in mind that the arrests were conducted over a period extending from March to April. This was not publicized, but became known to certain governments, including the United States and Israel, in April. Reportedly, diplomatic channels were opened with the help of Iran-friendly Western governments and religious personalities, in order to resolve the problem and to prevent the issue from becoming a pretext for a new Iran-bashing campaign, especially in light of the immense achievements of President Khatami.

It is neither in the interests of the suspects, nor in the joint interests of Iran and the Western world, to put public demands on Iran, a sovereign nation with no record of discrimination against Jews or other religious minorities, before the investigations are concluded. Any foreign interference — even if it’s well-intentioned — in this matter, will just make things more complicated.

The timing of the scandal

In the same week that the “spy scandal” was publicized, the U.S. administration and the Group of Eight (G-8) made some interesting overtures toward Iran. Most significantly, the G-8 foreign ministers said in a joint statement in Cologne on June 10: “We want to see closer relations with Iran and urge Tehran to adopt a more positive approach to the Middle East peace process.” The G-8 statement added: “We welcome recent political developments in Iran, including the holding of the first local elections.” The G-8 ministers urged Iran to do more for the human rights of all its citizens, and to continue to condemn all forms of terrorism.

Meanwhile, the Clinton administration decided to issue rules reversing the negative impact of the sanctions imposed on Iran, Sudan, and Libya, and to facilitate sales of grain and other food products to them. Undersecretary of State for Economic and Business Affairs Stuart Eizenstat said that the new rules should be out by the end of the month. “The President’s basic decision was that starvation should not be a matter of foreign policy,” Eizenstat told the House Agriculture Committee. In a potentially significant development, Eizenstat told the panel that the administration would monitor competitor activity to determine if U.S. loan guarantees are needed to make sales to Iran and the other two countries.

According to Reuters, one U.S. firm, Niki Trading Co., has been sitting for more than six months on an order from the Government Trade Corp. of Iran for 3.55 million tons of U.S. farm goods, waiting for U.S. government approval.

Meanwhile, Bruce Reidel, Clinton’s senior adviser for Near Eastern Affairs and a director of the Middle East affairs in the National Security Council, told the Arabic daily *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* on June 10 that “the United States is encour-

aged by the improvement which the relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran are witnessing.” He added: “We very much welcome this important development which we consider an important and positive step in reducing tensions in the region of the Gulf.”

The important strategic developments, especially the building of the Eurasian Land-Bridge, or the New Silk Road, depends largely on the pivotal role which Iran could play. Iran’s good relations with its neighbors and the West are indispensable for the stability of the Middle East and Central Asia. It remains to be seen whether this issue creates a major crisis in these relations, or whether it will be dealt with prudently.

Informing on the Jewish community in Iran

There are about 27,000 Iranian Jews living in Iran currently. They enjoy equal rights as citizens of the Islamic Republic according to the Constitution. The Iranian Jewish community is represented in the Iranian Majlis (Parliament). In a communiqué issued in Tehran by representatives of the Jewish community on June 14, and reported by the official Iranian News Agency, they said that “Jews of Iran have historically been loyal to the people and government of Iran, and have consistently strived for the dignity and prosperity of the Iranian nation of which they are a part.” The communiqué echoed the sorrow of the Jewish community over the arrest of Jewish citizens, but said that Jews of Iran were confident that justice will be done with due respect to the rights of the accused.

The communiqué was signed by a group of leading members of the Iranian Jewish community in Iran, among them Rabbi Youssef Hamedani Kohan, Jewish Member of Parliament Manouchehr Eliassi, and member of the board of directors of the Society of Iranian Jews Haroun Yashaya-ee. The communiqué expressed confidence that “provocative propaganda of the enemies of the country in or outside Iran would not affect either way the eventual judgment of the Iranian courts.”

A well-informed source on Israeli intelligence history told *EIR* that “it is highly unusual that the Mossad would recruit members of the Jewish minorities in Islamic countries, especially if it involves a Chief Rabbi.” The source, who did not rule out that the Netanyahu government might have been involved in such dirty tactics in the past few years, noted that the “spying” case might be related to activities of certain groups that have been involved in helping Jews in Muslim countries to immigrate to Israel through other countries.