

Introduction

“The Iranian Jews are the most researched non-Muslim religious minority in Iran.”¹ Even if this statement is correct, scholarship on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Iranian Jews is still many times sparse compared to the research conducted on Jews residing elsewhere. One can hardly speak of diverse approaches, different schools of historiography, or even major debates among the few scholars who address Iranian Jewry’s recent past. Generally, scholars make no serious attempt to compare the Jews’ situation in Iran with that in other places, or to systematically juxtapose, connect, or contrast questions relevant to Iran’s Jews and issues of broader Jewish significance. Absent also is a thorough comparison between the treatment of religious minorities by Iranian society and the treatment of religious minorities in other countries of the region and beyond. Several reasons may account for these deficiencies, one of them being the simple fact that we still do not possess data regarding various aspects of Jewish existence in Iran² without which no meaningful discourse can emerge in any field of research. While having no pretense of explicitly addressing the above shortcomings, the following work nevertheless seeks to establish some facts in an intelligible way that hopefully will prove useful in later discussions—concerning the Jews and the Middle East generally, and specifically regarding the history of Iran and its religious minorities, mainly the Jews.

“The history of the Jews in nineteenth-century Iran has been little studied.”³ This comment is applicable to scholarship on the Jews’ communal and cultural life—topics that will not engage the present work. It is equally valid with regard to research on the Jews’ religious, I

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social, and political status in that century. These issues, often mentioned only briefly and in passing, are at the core of this study. No comprehensive scholarly attempt has yet been made to weave all the known threads of information together into one tapestry.⁴ The present work, which focuses on the reign of Nasir al-Din Shah (1848–96), seeks to fill this void while suggesting new data and insights into the topic.

The extant primary sources concerning the Jews of the latter part of nineteenth-century Iran are meager compared to those about Jews in the Ottoman empire or Europe in the corresponding period.⁵ When the sources do discuss the Jews, they are usually limited in their scope of interest. They many times tend to emphasize and focus on Jewish ordeals. This is the case with numerous Iranian Jewish dispatches, missionary writings, travelers' itineraries, European Jews' accounts, and British diplomatic dispatches. As it is not always clear under what conditions the Jews lived between one documented onslaught and another, an impression of a rigid "uninterrupted sequence of persecution and oppression"⁶ emerges.

There are at least two possible major approaches to writing the history of the status of Iranian Jewry, based on the above mistreatment-oriented sources. One approach overlooks the chronological order of the various cases and clusters anti-Jewish incidents under different headings, each defined according to the following elements: one group of headings would focus on the reasons, both apparent and latent, for anti-Jewish outbreaks (economic; political; religious). Another group would deal with the process of the outbreaks and their various immediate results (killings; forced conversion; emigration of Jews). A third group would concentrate on the authorities' reactions to and handling of the attacks (participation in attacks upon Jews; indifference; punishment of culprits). Such a method helps one understand anti-Jewish events not as scattered and isolated cases, as they emerge from the sources, but as having some common denominators and internal logic; they thus become part of a more comprehensible whole. However, this method may impede one's ability to look at the situation through chronological lenses. It may partly reduce one's ability to detect occasional changes in the Jews' condition, from one outbreak to

another; consequently, it would appear to reinforce the picture of incessant persecution.

A second approach to the available sources is the sequential, chronological line. This method affords a more nuanced picture of events; it enables one to notice possible changes in the Jews' position, from one attack to another. The present study will attempt to show, for example, that some change in the Jews' situation came about eventually precisely because of the persecutions. Repression occasionally caused Europe to become more aware of Iranian Jewry's plight, in turn causing Europe to pressure Iran to safeguard its Jewish subjects.

My examination of anti-Jewish incidents combines aspects of both these methods. The nature of the preserved sources allows for a consideration of geographically scattered areas. The dispersion of events throughout Iran over several decades is also a major advantage, as it may highlight some recurring paradigms and themes over time and space. The paradigms that emerge from this approach, alongside awareness of possible developments and delicate changes in the Jews' circumstances in a chronological perspective, assure the relative reliability of the overall emerging picture.

The Jews did not exist in their own universe, separated from Iranian soil and society. Thus, attention will be given to processes that swept over Iran as a whole, also influencing the Jews' status. Through analysis of the specific case study of the Jewish minority, insights can be gained into broader processes pertaining to other religious minorities and to the second half of nineteenth-century Iran in general. The interplay between intervening foreigners, sectors of the Shi'i majority, and local Jews influenced the standing of the Jews during the latter part of the century. Understanding this interaction provides some insights into Iranian society and its dilemmas, some of which have persisted beyond the end of the nineteenth century.

Chapter 1 examines the status of the Jews according to Shi'i Imami Islam, as reflected by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Shi'i polemical and mainly legal material. It concludes that Jews, like other religious minorities, were regarded as second-class subjects, meriting protection while also subjected to limitations. Muslim law accorded the Jews a religious, social, and political status inferior to that of Muslims.

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In accordance with this Muslim view, on the eve of Nasir al-Din Shah's inauguration in 1848, large sections of society usually regarded and approached Iranian Jews as a community whose position was beneath that of Muslims. During that period, the Jews' religious, social, and political status was many times set or inspired by Shi'i Muslim parameters.

At the same time, however, the Shi'i-inspired assigned religious, social, and political status of the Jews was not the sole determinant of their real-life situation. I pay some attention to the actual attitudes of various Iranian social elements, including the doctors of Shi'i law—the ulama—and I shall argue that the ulama's and other elements' treatment of the Jews was not based solely on religious-ideological-legal grounds. Other factors were at work, influencing the ulama, the political authorities, and the general population. At times, actions toward the Jews were motivated by religious Shi'i precepts, precepts expressed in political and economic forms. On other occasions, however, such actions were first and foremost motivated by political and socio-economic reasons; these political and socio-economic reasons were occasionally justified by reference to religious and legal precedent.

Following a chronological line, Chapter 2 (1848–66) introduces the major players that intervened on behalf of the Jews and pressured Iran to ameliorate their status and situation. Not only were Western Jewish institutions and influential figures involved, but the great powers intervened as well. At the same time, Iranian Jews directed their own appeals to Europe for protection. Outside involvement would occasionally result in government efforts toward improving the position and condition of the Jews.

Further steps toward alteration in the Jews' position are discussed in Chapter 3 (1866–73). During this period, foreign intervention on behalf of the Jews—who continued to suffer from occasional persecution and mistreatment as well as a major famine—seem to have grown stronger. This occurred together with a general increase in Iran's contact with Europe. Foreign pressure elicited concessions on the part of Iran in favor of the Jews, culminating in the Shah's 1873 pronouncement of equality for the Jews—in marked contrast to the prescribed status of religious minorities under Islam. Formally, the official political status of the Jews improved.

Such steps toward change, however, were wavering and hesitant. Chapter 4 (1874–83) demonstrates the fragility of the promised amelioration in the Jews' position. Jews were still exposed to occasional persecution and regular abuse, sometimes even from the government's own representatives. At other times, nevertheless, the authorities would attempt to redress the wrongs committed against the Jews.

Transformation in the Jews' status was resisted by indigenous elements, as shown in the final chapter (1884–96). These groups, among them some members of the ulama, rejected improvement of the Jews' situation and in fact called to reinforce their secondary status under Islam for religious, social, economic, and political reasons. The government found itself maneuvering between foreign pressure to improve the Jews' condition and pressure from local Shi'i elements calling for the preservation of old indigenous practices and the Islamic worldview. The Jews' political status improved to a limited extent, but their religious and social status generally remained the same.

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The history of the Jews' position in Iran from ancient times until the latter part of the eighteenth century is not all of one color. Their situation depended very often on the attitude of the particular ruler and his administration. In dealing with the Jews, as well as with other minorities, the government might have considered internal or external necessities: social, economic, political, and religious. It may be assumed that Jewish well-being was also dependent on the attitude of society at large—in all its various components—as well as specific circumstances in different places.

Beginning with the end of the reign of Shah 'Abbas I (r. 1588–1629) the condition of the Jews generally deteriorated. This trend became more pronounced under Shah 'Abbas II (r. 1642–66) and continued in subsequent years. By the nineteenth century, according to many accounts, the Jews in various Iranian localities were constantly being humiliated and abused, and on occasion ruthlessly attacked. It is to the Jewish situation during the nineteenth century that the present work now turns, seeking to establish some facts about the numbers, geographical diffusion, and economic pursuits of the Jews.

Nineteenth-Century Iranian Jewry

Statistics

A. Netzer points out that although some accounts exist, “it is difficult to reach any conclusion” concerning the size of the Jewish population in nineteenth-century Iran. Figures are lacking regarding various Iranian locales.⁷ This claim can be corroborated. Contemporary observers, mostly travelers, missionaries, diplomats, or Jewish emissaries, who wrote the available accounts, did not undertake systematic house-to-house surveys in an attempt to arrive at an accurate figure. This may explain the various, and sometimes contradictory, numbers supplied by the different authors. Furthermore, nineteenth-century Iran underwent intervals of famine, epidemic, and emigration, which contributed to fluctuations in the size of the communities. It is thus difficult to reach any verifiable conclusion regarding the numbers of Iranian Jews during the nineteenth century.

However, one can make a rough estimate of the Jewish population at the end of the nineteenth and in the early twentieth centuries. Archival material not previously explored provides information that seems to have been at least partially systematically collected. An 1890 British Foreign Office memorandum contains an account of twenty-eight places in Iran with a total number of 25,090 Jewish inhabitants.⁸ This census, however, is incomplete. It does not include places such as Mashhad, where another Foreign Office memorandum counted about 1,000 Jews.⁹

In 1903–04, the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) undertook a survey of the Jewish population of North Africa, Ottoman Turkey, and Iran. The final official results showed that there were approximately 49,500 Jews in various districts in Iran. The report admits the difficulty in arriving at complete and exact statistics. Only the numbers given for Tehran, Isfahan, Hamadan and its surroundings, Shiraz and its surroundings, Sinih (Sanandaj), Kirmanshah (Bakhtaran) and its surroundings, Urumiyah, and Kashan are certain.¹⁰ The total recorded for these areas reached 33,680 Jews.

There seems to be a discrepancy between these numbers, based on the data provided by the AIU, and the data from the Foreign Office.

A calculation of the number of Jews only in these certain locales according to the aforementioned first Foreign Office memorandum shows 17,425 Jews in 1890, slightly more than half of the 33,680 figure given in the 1903–1904 AIU census. The community in Isfahan may offer an illustration. In 1890 the British Foreign Office “house to house census” found 2,675 Jews. The AIU reported 6,000 Jews by 1903–1904. The Isfahan Jewish community, then, would have more than doubled between 1890 and 1903–04.

Is it reasonable to conclude that the Jewish population in the major centers roughly doubled in size in less than fifteen years? Given the poor sanitary conditions prevailing in Iran, in addition to famines and epidemics, this conclusion seems mistaken. The explanation for the statistical anomaly might be that at least one of the estimations is inaccurate.

On the one hand, it is plausible that the Foreign Office evaluation is imprecise, as, except in the case of Isfahan, it was not made on a house-to-house basis, but relied on information provided by the Jews themselves. Even in Isfahan the method used to determine the number of people in each household is not clear. The Jews might have been apprehensive about disclosing their true figures to a foreign power; they might have opted for supplying the British with smaller numbers, lest the precise, higher ones find their way to the Iranian authorities and lead to higher taxation.¹¹ One source argues that “it is common for the Jews to underrate their population, lest, by appearing numerous and powerful, they should increase the oppressions under which they groan.”¹²

On the other hand, the AIU’s assessment is probably also inexact, as the Jews might have been afraid to report their real numbers for religious reasons. Tallying people was believed to inflict untimely death on those counted. In one case, the AIU asked the Bushihr community to provide its numbers. In response, the community’s representatives said, “we cannot do so [i.e. furnish the exact number], as you [are] aware since the [!] King David numbers [i.e. numbered] the Jews and [by counting them, he] did not please god [!], it is not advisable that we should do it again, but we can [only] give you proximate numbers as undermentioned.”¹³

Even with these problems in mind, the AIU's estimates regarding the major aforementioned locales still seem more accurate than the Foreign Office's. By 1904 the AIU had already founded schools in Tehran, Isfahan, Hamadan, Shiraz, Sanandaj, and Kirmanshah. Its representatives' contact with the Jews in these places to some extent could guarantee a higher degree of precision in evaluating their numbers.

To conclude, the AIU assessed 33,680 Jews in the listed places. It is reasonable to assume the presence of at least 6,000 in other locales. This, then, leaves us with the likely figure of at least 40,000 Jews at the start of the twentieth century. The population of Iran at that time is estimated at about ten million.¹⁴ If these figures are correct, the Jews represented at least 0.4 percent of the total population.¹⁵ Numerically, the Jews were thus a relatively negligible component of Iranian society.

In addition to the above general evaluation, the percentage of Jews in different locations relative to the general population should be examined. This estimation shows that their percentage in some of the major cities was occasionally higher than in Iran as a whole. Thus, for instance, censuses in 1882 Isfahan found either 5,306 Jews out of 73,785 souls (7.1 percent) or 6,462 out of 73,526 (8.7 percent). According to one estimate, in 1895, out of some 40,000 people in Hamadan, Jews totaled 4,000 (10 percent). One estimation has Jews in 1903 Shiraz at 5,000 out of 50,000 souls (10 percent).¹⁶

Geographical Setting

The dispersion of the Jews in Iran is an even more elusive problem than the question of the size of the Jewish population. In a table that breaks down the numbers of Jews in various locales, the *Bulletin Annuel* of the AIU reserves an entry for Jews "scattered in numerous villages," without specifying the exact locations of these places. The areas surrounding Hamadan, Shiraz, Kirmanshah, among other places, are not explicitly indicated.¹⁷

The Foreign Office and AIU material partially help to establish a tentative map of Jewish residence in Iran. To date, we know that Jews lived in and around the following places: Tehran, Hamadan, Isfahan, Shiraz, Sanandaj, Kirmanshah, Sulduz (Naqadah), Urumiyyah, Kangawar, Kashan, Bushihr, Kazarun, Yazd, Kirman, Nihawand, Burujird, Saqqiz,

Bijar, Gulpaygan, Khwansar, Salmas (Shahpur), Banah, Damawand, Khurramabad, Siyahkal, Dawlatabad (Malayir), Rasht, Asadabad, Tuysirkan, Barfurush (Babul), Zaqan, Zanjan, Sawjbulagh (Mahabad), Miyanduab, Darab, and Mashhad,¹⁸ among others.

According to the AIU, the largest communities in 1903–04 were those of Shiraz and its surroundings (7,080), Isfahan (6,000), Hamadan and its surroundings (5,900), Tehran (5,100), Kirmanshah and its surroundings (3,800), Yazd (2,500), Urumiyyah (2,200), Kirman (2,000), Kashan (1,800), and Sanandaj (1,800).¹⁹ Although scattered throughout Iran, by the late nineteenth century Jews seem to have been concentrated in the central and western regions of the country. The majority of the Jewish communities appear to have been urban based, although many Jews frequently traveled to or lived in rural areas.

Internal emigration²⁰ was generally to the capital. Immigrants came to Tehran from various locales, such as Hamadan, Isfahan, Yazd, and Kashan.²¹ Jews moved to Tehran probably because of the hope that the Shah would offer them protection, and because of the economic prospects which the capital afforded them.

Economic Basis

Examining the economic basis of Iranian Jewry may throw light on the processes that were sweeping over many aspects of Jewish life and over Iran in general. To some degree, the professions practiced by the Jews determined and mirrored their social status and the level of their relations with, as well as their integration into, the larger society.

How did nineteenth-century Iranian Jews sustain themselves economically? What were their vocations? Were these professions geared toward providing necessities to Jews only, or did they also fulfill socio-economic functions necessary to society at large? It appears that the Jewish community, rather than being a socio-economically independent group on the fringes of a different and unconnected Iranian-Muslim population, was part and parcel of the society and economy.

Many nineteenth-century Jews were peddlers and merchants,²² who roamed about between cities, villages, and houses.²³ The Jews of Kazarun, for example, traded in Indian spices between Bushihr and Shiraz.²⁴ Jews were peddlers and traders since these occupations did

not require much capital or property. Furthermore, Muslims often prohibited Jews from opening shops in the city bazaars;²⁵ this occurred in Shiraz, and Tehran as late as 1904. The prohibition pushed many Jews into working as peddlers and small merchants.²⁶ The pretext for the ordinance was usually the Jews' "impurity."²⁷ In addition to this religious justification, however, there was possibly also the apprehension of having to compete with the Jews in city markets. Nevertheless, in some places, such as Hamadan, Jews did own shops in the bazaars.²⁸

Overall, Jewish trade and peddling appear to have been minor in extent and marginal to national economic performance. However, in certain areas, such as the Persian Gulf and especially Bushihr, the commercial activity of the Jews made up a significant portion of general trade. In other places, Jewish merchants virtually controlled the passage of goods. This is attested to in a 1904 report stating that the Jews were prominent in the cotton textile import trade from Manchester via Baghdad; "at least 80 per cent of the [Kirmanshah and Hamadan] trade is in the hands of Jewish traders" and "the business in Muhammara [Khurramshahr] is largely in the hands of small Jew traders."²⁹

Indeed, Jews would sometimes leave Iran altogether in pursuit of their vocations, apparently on a seasonal basis. Thus, Jews, Nestorians, and Armenians used to depart from Iran via Urumiyah and Khuy toward Russia "and elsewhere . . . in order to earn their livelihood."³⁰

Some Jews owned small businesses or were dealers in old clothing. Others worked as tailors, engravers, moneychangers (Heb. *shulhani*), moneylenders, glass polishers, producers of salt and ammoniac, midwives, prostitutes, writers of talismans and amulets, necromancers, and "fortune-tellers and exorcists." There were Jews who owned fields.³¹

Islamic culture and customs encouraged some Jews to incline toward certain professions. This seems to have been partly the case with the Shi'i purity concerns, which directed some Jews toward peddling and trade. Furthermore, Muslims were "practically forbidden" from working in gold- or silver-oriented crafts since the recompense for work in silver or gold is viewed as usury, which is prohibited in Islam.³² Needless to say, Muslims acquired ornamental gold and silver objects, which have an important artistic and socio-cultural function. Non-Muslims thus occasionally worked as silversmiths and in related pro-

fessions throughout the lands of Islam. The Jews of Hamadan, for instance, were “workers in silver . . . and sellers of old coins.”³³

Islam forbids Muslims from preparing and consuming wine and other alcoholic beverages. Although this procedure was not always sanctioned by certain ulama, wine production was sometimes left to non-Muslims, who satisfied their own needs as well as the illicit Muslim market for alcohol. The Jews of Shiraz and Hamadan sold and occasionally manufactured spirits. A certain Bushihr Jewish merchant and a banker of the British, Elyas, used to export kosher wine to Jewish communities in India.³⁴

Given their low status, Jews were permitted to pursue vocations that were shunned by the Muslims as socially despised or regarded as immoral. The Jews were “expected to undertake dirty work of every kind.”³⁵ “When anything very filthy is to be done a Jew is sent for.”³⁶ “Jews are saved, all over Persia, to perform the most loathsome and degrading offices.”³⁷ Examples include dyeing,³⁸ which sometimes involved strong odors, doing scavenger work,³⁹ and cleaning excrement pits.⁴⁰ Some Jews were also singers, musicians, and dancers⁴¹—all activities regarded as worthy only of dissolute persons. Performing these necessary, yet socially detested, jobs, the Jews constituted a vital economic element in the greater society.⁴² Evidently, some of these professions helped the Jews to interact with the Muslim majority.

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In contrast to some of these despised occupations, there were also professions that instilled respect in the general population for their Jewish exponents. One such craft was medicine. Often serving as local rabbis, Jewish physicians were solicited by both Jews and Muslims. Some Jewish physicians were even asked to treat the Shah and his household. Famous among them were the Khwansari Haqq Nazar and his brother Musa, who had some connections with Nasir al-Din Shah’s mother and one of his wives, Jayran. Another important court physician was Nehorai Nur Mahmud, originally from Kashan.⁴³ Due to its lofty status, this profession was frequently passed down from father to son, and families of physicians are known to have existed. A case in point was a certain Gulpaygan family, some of whose members practiced medicine from at least the last quarter of the eighteenth century through the start of the twentieth.⁴⁴

In Muslim society, non-Muslims were theoretically prohibited from holding office over Muslims. However, there are some nineteenth-century Iranian Jews who reached the highest administrative posts. Nasir al-Din Shah viewed Hajji Ibrahim, the first premier of the Qajars, as a Jew. It is not clear, however, whether Ibrahim was indeed of Jewish origin.⁴⁵ Yequtieli, an Isfahan Jewish dancer who attracted the attention of Fath 'Ali Shah (r. 1797–1834), was summoned to the court. He later converted to Islam, assuming the name Isma'il. As of 1846 he had "great influence."⁴⁶ Nevertheless, such cases appear to have been rare and scarcely embody the tradition of 'Court Jews' familiar to the students of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Western Europe or nineteenth-century North Africa.

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W. Fischel argues that "the peculiar economic status of the Jews was a result of their centuries-long oppression and persecution."⁴⁷ Even if this comment is partly accurate, it assumes, to some extent, a static situation in the Jews' economic basis. There is evidence to demonstrate that this was not always the case. During the nineteenth century, some Jews embarked upon professions oriented toward the new economic era heralded by Western economic penetration.

The most important economic field in nineteenth-century Iran was agriculture. During this period, agriculture moved from subsistence to cash crops in response to growing relations with Europe. Cultivation evolved based on foreign demand. Silk, a cash crop, was the most significant export product until 1864, when the effects of a silkworm disease that struck Europe reached Iran. External demand for silk caused foreign merchants, from the late 1860s onwards, to invest in Iranian silk cultivation, thus contributing to the partial revival of production.⁴⁸ Jews from Isfahan, Hamadan, Shiraz, and Yazd, like many other Iranians, joined in the silk fever, engaging in the weaving, spinning, and twisting of silk.⁴⁹

The increase in cash crops should be understood not only in light of the demands of outside markets. European goods were increasingly imported into Iran. In the south, these were mainly cotton goods,⁵⁰ while other popular "colonial products" were tea, coffee, and sugar. This affected the process of moving toward cash crops. Iranian im-

ports were initially paid for with bullion. The chronic bullion drain⁵¹ caused Iran to divert crop production for local consumption to cash crops in order to raise the necessary money for imports. Production of opium, one of the most significant Iranian cash crops of the latter part of the nineteenth century, is a case in point. To pay for imports, increasing numbers of fields were converted to opium cultivation, which was more profitable than cereals. European capitalists bought Iranian opium and sold it in China and Europe.⁵²

These new developments did not bypass the Jews, who both benefited from and contributed to them. By 1905, many Isfahan Jews were said to be trading in opium. They purchased crude opium and had it refined. The commerce occasionally traveled beyond Iran, as they exported opium to India and China. The head of the Isfahan community is said to have had commercial opium contacts with the House of David Sassoon in Hong Kong and Bombay.⁵³ Contacts with Europe influenced and altered the economic basis of many Iranians, and Jews were no exception to this trend.⁵⁴

Besides these general economic trends, another major factor contributed to the transformation of Jewish vocations. Established in 1860 in Paris, the AIU extended aid to Iranian Jewry throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century. It provided pecuniary assistance and pressured the Iranian authorities, both directly and circuitously, to intervene on behalf of the Jews. Thanks to the protection of the AIU's representatives, for instance, the Jews of Isfahan started to open shops in their quarter.⁵⁵ Entrance to the marketplaces, in turn, laid a foundation for gradual improvement in the Jews' economic situation. Furthermore, it enabled them to interact with the members of the greater society on a more frequent basis, thereby slowly paving the way for their continued incorporation into Iranian society.⁵⁶

Examination of Iranian Jews' professions not only indicates their economic basis, but also reflects their usually inferior social status within the larger Muslim society. However, although Jews were frequently reduced to vocations religiously illicit for Muslims, socially despised, or regarded as immoral, they were still a part of society and were affected by general economic trends. They filled roles prohibited to Muslims or that Muslims refused to engage in due to religious or

social factors. Furthermore, like other Iranians, Jews influenced and responded to new economic developments rooted in the increasing contact with the world economy.

Some Jewish movement from socially debased functions to new professions and economic spheres usually controlled by Muslims may have threatened some Muslims economically, and this may have resulted in increased levels of mistreatment and persecution. Although Jews comprised a statistically insignificant portion of Iranian society, their relatively high presence in some major cities enhanced their visibility—for better or for worse—in the eyes of the Muslim majority. It is to the latter's attitude toward the Jews that this work now turns.