

REVIEW ESSAY

Iranian Immigration to Israel: History and Voices, in the Shadow Of Kings by Ali L. Ezzatyar. London: Abingdon and New York, 2022. 219 pages

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A relatively small immigrant community in a small country might sound like a niche topic, but the valence changes when the two are some of the most talked about countries in the world, especially in relation to one another. But despite all the attention bestowed upon Iran and Israel, the scholarly literature on their links and entanglements is still surprisingly thin. By producing the first-ever monograph on Iranian immigration to Israel, Ezzatyar has done an incredible service, building on the work of scholars of Iran-Israel ties and Iranian Jewish diaspora such as Lior Sternfeld, David Menashri, David Yeroushalmi, Hilda Nissimi, Homa Sarshar, and Houman Sarshar.

A lawyer and diplomat, whose first book was on an important Kurdish Iranian Islamic thinker, Ezzatyar is not an academic and thus not bound by the conventions of a particular discipline. As a result, his book uses a mix of methods, including archival research, statistical analysis, ethnography, and oral history interviews. The result can be unwieldy at times, but the book ends up deftly taking on the most important questions on the topic, often using the best of available data. Impressively, he has conducted research in archives of the American Joint Jewish Distribution Committee (JDC) in the US, the National Archives in the UK, and those of the Central Bureau of Statistics, Central Zionist Archives, Haganah, Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), and Iranian-Israeli Friendship Association in Israel. He has also done fieldwork in Israel, conducting a number of oral history interviews with Iranian immigrants to Israel, several of which are produced in length throughout the book, forming an excellent part of it.

In nine chapters, Ezzatyar offers a historical account of Iranian Jews from ancient to contemporary times (chapters 1 and 5), their encounter with the Zionist movement and the state of Israel in the 20th century (chapters 2 and 3), the traumatic experience of the 1979 revolution (chapter 6), and their lives as immigrants in Israel (chapters 7 to 9.) A separate chapter (chapter 4) is devoted to “The Special Case of the Jews of Mashhad,” a community dating to the mid-18th century, which, responding to a pogrom in 1839, hid its Jewish identity by outwardly practicing Islam. Mashhadi Jews form a “community within community” today, maintaining their cohesive identity and institutions in both Israel and diasporic contexts such as the US.

Ezzatyar’s sweeping account is rich in detail and the book’s strong suit are the many little insights it offers throughout. Nevertheless, a few broad conclusions can also be drawn. First,

although Iranian immigrants to Israel are often studied as part of the broader “Mizrahim” (“Easterners,” a term for Israeli Jews with roots in Middle East and North Africa), this classification makes little sense for Iranian Jews, who have quite a unique history, very different relationship between the different aspects of their identity, and different positionality toward the Israeli-Arab conflict. As Ezzatyar explains, “Iranian-Jews are likely the only *Mizrahim* without a majority of their community in Israel” (p. 17). Elsewhere, the author makes the point that, following Israel’s independence in 1948, Iranian Jews, unlike most of their counterparts in Arab countries, were not targeted by either their government or fellow Iranians, who “did not view the events in Palestine as politically relevant to the extent their Arab neighbors did” (p. 24).

Another important takeaway of the book is the profound ambivalence of Iranian Jews toward migration to Israel, which does not sit easily with ideologically rigid accounts. Crucially, this does not speak to Iranian Jews being hostile to Israel (as many have claimed, particularly since 1979), but rather their attachment to Iran as their homeland. As Ezzatyar explains, “Morally supporting Israel was natural for many Iranian-Jews... [but] for most of them, supporting Israel and living Israel were two very different choices” (p. 126).

Ezzatyar has done considerable work to identify various waves of Iranian immigration to Israel, encountering significant archival difficulties, some of which are particularly frustrating. For instance, the Israeli census of 1961 grouped Turkey and Iran together under the category “country of birth” and, as a result, it is hard to know how many Israeli citizens had been born in Iran (p. 144.)

Overcoming these difficulties, Ezzatyar offers a number of important findings. First, there was only one “genuine *aliyah* wave” out of Iran, and that occurred in the few years following 1948. In exploring this wave, which the author names “imperious *aliyah*,” he describes some of the challenges of the Zionist emissaries who were encouraging Jewish emigration out of Iran. Not all these challenges emanated from Iran. As he shows, the Zionist planners in Jerusalem also maintained an ambivalence toward Iranian Jews. The close relationship between the Israeli and Iranian states meant that Iranian Jews were not seen as a community in danger. Israelis also did not want to upset the shah and, “given the balance of factors, preservation of that bilateral relationship was more of a priority than Iranian *aliyah*” (p. 24).

Nevertheless, a considerable number of Iranian Jews did leave in this early Israeli period, with the highest estimates being around 25 percent of the community. Ezzatyar unveils one important event: as Israel organized an exodus of Iraqi Jews to Israel via Iran in 1951, many Iranians used the opportunity of the airlift to hitch a ride to Israel. Many of these were Jews of poorer backgrounds, who were excited by the opportunity of migration.

Ezzatyar does not shy away from the most controversial aspects of the Iranian immigrant experience in Israel. Some of his interlocutors point out, for instance, that the racism they experienced in Israel’s Ashkenazi-majority society was “no more preferable to experience of Iranian ‘anti-Semitism’” (p. 65). More broadly, he points out that “the Iranian-Israeli experience is defined by a greater degree of resistance against the dominant ethos in certain critical areas for cultural identity” (p. 161–3).

The book thus stays away from idealizing the Iranian experience in Israel, but Ezzatyar does not offer a flat converse image either. The oral history interviews in the book help paint full pictures of these often fascinating lives, in all their complexities and contradictions. One is with Moshe Sadeghan, who lost his brother, Farzin, an Iranian soldier who died fighting Iraq in the 1980s. Moshe is quite nostalgic about Iran and critical of his experiences in Israel, and yet also supports the ultra-Orthodox Mizrahi Shas party, usually part of Israel’s right-wing coalition (p. 180–2). As Ezzatyar explains, Moshe’s “hybrid identity defies many of the constructs set out both for the Zionist archetype and for the postcolonial victim” (p. 185).

Another oral history interviewee is Moussa Pourrostamian, a Jewish banker who became a top bank manager under the Islamic Republic before facing arrest, prosecution, and finally being smuggled out of Iran and into Israel (p. 115–121). In Iran, Moussa was helped by some officials of the Islamic Republic, who had fond memories of him pre-1979.

On the delicate topic of the 1979 revolution and Jewish life under the Islamic Republic, Ezzatyar offers a balanced account. As he explains, the revolution did eventually push the majority of Iranian Jews to emigrate, but this was the case of “a second exodus but not a second *aliyah*,” as most did not choose to migrate to Israel (p. 148). In fact, an entire chapter of the book (chapter 7) is dedicated to Iranian Jewish migration to countries other than Israel as well as “negative immigration” out of Israel. On the latter point, Ezzatyar notes that of the many Iranian Jews who arrived in Israel, “far more of them have probably left Israel than has been researched or understood” (p. 133).

By taking on a myriad of different aspects of a complex topic, and by not shying away from sensitive matters bound to cause interest with many constituencies, Ezzatyar has produced a fine pioneering work that will be a must citation in future works on the topic. Additionally, the book’s oral history interviews are suitable for assignment in syllabi on modern Iranian and Israeli histories or global courses on immigration in the 20th century.