Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s reign (1941-79) is generally conceived of as the golden age of Jewish life in Iran. The population numbered between eighty and one hundred thousand individuals at its height. During this period, Iran’s Jews experienced unprecedented upward socioeconomic mobility and a widely successful integration process into the greater Iranian society. Jews were prominent in commerce and the medical and pharmaceutical fields, and were overrepresented in universities as students and professors. They operated their own institutions including synagogues, schools, newspapers, philanthropic organizations, and youth clubs. Engagement in a diverse array of professions and activities brought Jews into contact with the larger non-Jewish world and reinforced their rootedness in the social, cultural, and economic facets of Iranian life. Lior B. Sternfeld’s Between Iran and Zion: Jewish Histories of Twentieth-Century Iran is a significant contribution to the history of the Jewish communities of Iran during this era, and it shifts our attention to the critical involvement of Jews in Iran’s political and national spheres.

This focus on the politicization of Iran’s Jews is critical because, as Sternfeld rightly asserts, much of the existing historiography on the Jews of Iran posits that they “abstained from participating in national political events such as the 1979 revolution” (p. 8). This literature, which overwhelmingly portrays the existence of Jews in Iran as an unremitting series of “persecution, harassment, pogroms, and ... discrimination” (p. 6), also treats Jews as an “isolated community ... one that rarely interacted with the broader Iranian society” (p. 2). With this well-researched study, drawing from an impressive range of sources, Sternfeld challenges these problematic depictions. Between Iran and Zion explores the political and social transformations of the Jews of Iran, and Tehran in particular, between 1941 and the early 1980s. This book endeavors to shed light on the relationship of the Jews of Iran with the greater Iranian society and state. It is also concerned with Iranian Jewish identity, in all its various configurations.

Between Iran and Zion is divided thematically into four chapters. Chapter 1 discusses the demographic shifts that occurred in Iran in 1941 following the joint Soviet and British removal of the first Pahlavi ruler, Reza Shah, from the throne. In the period directly following the shah’s forced abdication, and Iran’s subsequent entrance into the Second World War, there were up to one million newcomers in Iran, comprised of Allied troops, refugees, and migrants. This chapter focuses in particular on two of the groups included among those arrivals: Polish refugees and Iraqi Jewish immigrants. In this chapter Sternfeld looks at
what he terms the “hybrid identity” (p. 36) that these individuals developed while in Iran. In other words, he examines the ways in which the identity of these groups was transformed by their Iranian milieu, as well as how they made their own mark on their surroundings.

Chapter 2, one of the most compelling and well-argued chapters of the book, examines the significant involvement of Jews in Iran’s political sphere in the 1940s and early 1950s. Sternfeld convincingly demonstrates that Jews were active in political movements at this time through their participation in the communist Tudeh Party and in their support for Mohammad Mosaddeq. This active political engagement, in which Jews collaborated with their non-Jewish compatriots, was one way in which the Jews of Iran were able to integrate themselves into the larger society. The Tudeh Party appealed to Jews, and other minority groups, because it viewed everyone as equal, regardless of their religious, ethnic, or socioeconomic affiliations. Furthermore, Sternfeld argues, it offered a space where minority groups could avoid the social rejection they had experienced elsewhere. This chapter highlights the important contribution Jews made to the Tudeh Party through their journalistic efforts. One of the party’s official newspapers, Rahbar, had several Jewish writers among its regular staff. Jews also published their own newspapers that espoused communist ideology. Shmuel Anvar, a Jewish Tudeh activist and journalist, founded the weekly newspaper Nissan, which was a strong proponent of the party’s antifascist and antiracist ideologies. Sternfeld’s in-depth examination of these journalistic efforts shows that Jewish writers, editors, and publishers used their journalism to center Iranian Jews in national political movements. Indeed, the Jewish writers and supporters of these publications wanted to see Jews “fit more seamlessly into Iranian society” (p. 56).

The third chapter in Between Iran and Zion explores the relationship between the Jews of Iran and the state of Israel. Between 1948 and 1951, nearly 22,000 Jews immigrated to Israel. Sternfeld argues that what mainly motivated this immigratory wave was the promise of an improved quality of life, rather than strong Zionist leanings, since the Jews who left Iran in these years were overwhelmingly destitute. He discusses the harsh conditions and treatment Iranian Jews faced upon arriving in Israel, which led many of them to discourage their families and friends back in Iran from immigrating. Sternfeld also notes that a significant number of those who had left for Israel ended up moving back to Iran. By 1952 the immigration of Iranian Jews reached a standstill. Sternfeld demonstrates in this chapter that although immigration to Israel was one option available for the Jews of Iran, it was not the main one, as the vast majority of them chose to stay in Iran. Because the Jews “self-identified first and foremost as Iranian” they stayed and endeavored to assimilate into Iranian society (p. 90). Still, Sternfeld establishes in this chapter that although most of Iran’s Jews chose not to immigrate to Israel, they still “showed interest in Israel’s social, political, and economic evolution” (p. 82).

Chapter 4, which is partly based on two of Sternfeld’s previously published articles, discusses the involvement of Jews in the political and social spheres in the years leading up to the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Sternfeld also briefly examines their place in postrevolutionary Iran. He asserts that by the time the protests surrounding the Revolution broke out, the Jews of Iran had already been “decisively integrated” (p. 92). This full integration, which had already facilitated their entrance into the political arena in the 1940s, as Sternfeld deftly demonstrates in chapter 2, also enabled the Jews to be “immensely active in student organizations and other opposition movements” in the 1970s (p. 96). Jews established their own pro-revolutionary organizations, such as the Association of Jewish Iranian Intellectuals, which was formed in March 1978 when revolutionary events were already underway. This organization
encouraged solidarity amongst all Iranians, and its members actively collaborated with Muslim Iranian activists in their opposition to Mohammad Reza Shah. Importantly, Sternfeld mentions that as many as five thousand Jews participated in the major anti-shah demonstration of December 11, 1978.

*Between Iran and Zion* could benefit from a more comprehensive discussion of the term “identity,” especially since this is a concept Sternfeld employs frequently throughout *Between Iran and Zion* to discuss the place of Jews in Iranian society. He contends that Iranian Jews could simultaneously occupy various identities, and that these multiple “identity categories were not mutually exclusive” (p. 73), but it is not always clear what he means by this term.

This one drawback aside, Sternfeld’s strength lies in his ability to successfully situate Iran’s Jews within the broader context of Iranian history. He demonstrates that the politicization of the Jews of Iran corresponded with the politicization of non-Jews in the country by highlighting the significant presence of Jews in protests against the shah. Sternfeld also skillfully challenges the existing historiography, which portrays the Jewish population of Iran as isolated and politically impotent. He does so by offering various examples of how they participated in larger political movements alongside their non-Jewish compatriots.

*Between Iran and Zion* is highly recommended not only for readers interested in an original and nuanced examination of Iranian Jewish life between the early 1940s and the early 1980s, but also for those seeking an understanding of the greater Iranian society during this time. It is an excellent demonstration that minority communities cannot be studied in a vacuum.

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