



BEFORE THE CONFLICT:  
**WHEN IRAN AND ISRAEL WERE ALLIES**

*| Article by Mickey Gelerstein - June 18 / 2025*

Before the bitter conflict of today, Iran and Israel were close allies, sharing oil, intelligence, and friendship. This is the lost chapter the world rarely remembers.

Imagine this: El Al flights landing in Tehran. Israeli engineers building Iranian infrastructure. Iranian oil fueling Israeli cities. Israeli intelligence training Iranian security forces. This is not a utopian fantasy; it is history. And it was not so long ago.

Today, as we are shaken by news of a new war, it may seem that the history of Iran and Israel is one of eternal enmity. But as Prime Minister Netanyahu emphasized in his war announcement, addressing the Iranian people: "Our struggle is not with you. Our struggle is with the brutal theocratic dictatorship of the Ayatollahs that has oppressed you for 46 years since 1979. When that changes, the great friendship between our two ancient peoples will flourish again."

We must not become prisoners of the present. The truth is that there was a time when Iran and Israel stood side by side, not as enemies, but as allies.

## **Ancient Bonds**

Long before modern states, the friendship between Persians and Jews spanned millennia. King Cyrus the Great is honored in Jewish tradition for liberating the Jews from Babylonian exile and allowing them to rebuild the Second Temple. Centuries later, the Sasanian Empire became a center of Jewish life, producing luminaries like Rav Ashi, one of the primary editors of the Babylonian Talmud.

Even after the Islamic conquest, Persian-Jewish relations remained remarkably stable. Medieval travelers marveled at thriving Jewish communities in Isfahan, Shiraz, and beyond. It was not mere tolerance, but a genuine coexistence between two ancient civilizations.

## **The Shah of Iran: A Strategic Friendship**

Under the rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941–1979), this ancestral respect blossomed into a modern alliance. From the early 1950s until the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran and Israel maintained a quiet, pragmatic partnership based on shared strategic interests.

Iran supplied up to 60% of Israel's oil through a discreet pipeline. El Al flights connected Tel Aviv with Tehran. Israeli experts assisted in Iranian agriculture, while Iranian students studied at Israeli universities.

Behind the scenes, the cooperation was even deeper. The Mossad helped train the Shah's secret police, the dreaded SAVAK. Israeli leaders like Rabin and Peres visited Tehran to coordinate policy. Both nations saw themselves as non-Arab powers in a hostile region, fostering an alliance based on mutual security concerns.

For Iran's Jewish community—then numbering around 80,000—it was a golden age. They participated in government, thrived in business, and maintained a vibrant religious life. Synagogues operated freely, kosher food was available, and Jewish schools flourished.

## **1979: The Revolution That Rewrote History**

In February 1979, everything changed. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini came to power, overthrew the Shah, and established a regime driven by a militant Shi'a ideology of extremist Muslim fanaticism.

Within days, Iran severed relations with Israel in an unthinkable manner. The former Israeli embassy in Tehran was handed over to the PLO. Yasser Arafat raised the Palestinian flag where the Star of David had once flown. In a single stroke, decades of quiet cooperation were erased and replaced by open hostility.

Khomeini's words were chilling: "We must all rise up to destroy Israel." Israel became the "Little Satan," alongside the "Great Satan," the United States. The new regime not only adopted the Palestinian cause but made it sacred.

Khomeini also instituted Quds Day, turning the last Friday of Ramadan into an annual demonstration for the destruction of Israel. The streets of Tehran filled with chants of "Death to Israel," flag burnings, and speeches denouncing Zionism as a corrosive threat.

But this was not just politics; it was ideology and antisemitism. The current Supreme Leader, Khamenei, has repeatedly described Israel in pathological terms, advocating for its eradication and denying the legitimacy of Jewish self-determination. The rhetoric blurred the line between opposing a state and denying a people's right to exist.

Yet, even in this environment, a remnant of Iran's ancient Jewish community—about 10,000 people today—continues to endure. Their continued presence speaks to a deeper truth: the bonds between Jews and Persians, forged over millennia, are not so easily erased.

## **A War on Memory**

This transformation was not just geopolitical; it was an assault on memory. The regime has worked tirelessly to erase the history of Persian-Jewish friendship, replacing millennia of coexistence with a manufactured hatred. But memory is stubborn.

Iranian exiles still speak warmly of their Jewish neighbors. Israelis of Iranian descent preserve Persian culture, cuisine, and language. And even within Iran, cracks persist in the official narrative. It is widely believed that some of Israel's most daring intelligence operations—including attacks on nuclear sites—were made possible by brave Iranians. These silent acts of defiance suggest that another history is still being written, one based on shared interests and mutual respect.

Netanyahu recently spoke of this possibility: "The peoples of those two countries now have the opportunity for a different future, a better future. So do the brave citizens of Iran."

This is not just a political hope; it is a moral one. History shows that Iran and Israel were not destined for conflict. There was a time when they built together. Perhaps one day they will do so again, not as enemies, but as partners with a shared memory and mutual respect.

May we live to see it.



*The Shah of Iran Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and his wife Farah Diba Pahlavi.*

The Shah ruled Iran from 1941 until 1979 when he was overthrown by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

He died in July 1980 in Egypt from cancer at only 60 years old.