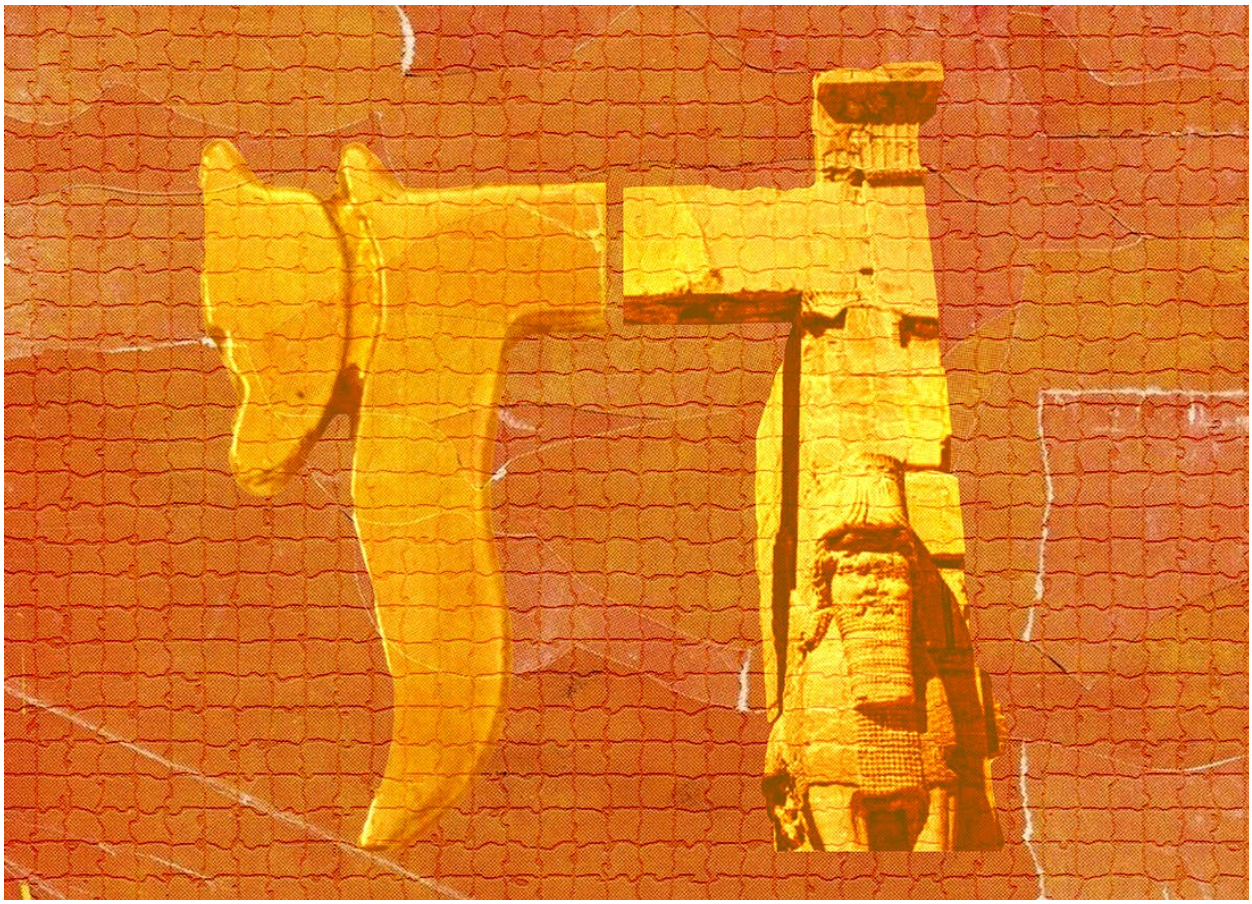
Why So Many Persian Jews Are Leading Voices Against Antisemitism—And Why It's No Coincidence

UT Austin student Jasmine Rad explains why the children of Iran's Jewish refugees are often the loudest voices for Israel on college campuses.

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by Jasmine Rad



When looking for help navigating my own organization, Longhorn Students for Israel, I often find that the voices I lean on are those who share the same identity as me. And as time goes on, I have found a common denominator between many popular college

campuses: their outspoken pro-Israel advocates and leaders are commonly children of Persian-Jewish immigrants.

This is not a coincidence—it's rooted in the echo that exiled Persian Jews in America carry with them. This echo shapes how we understand antisemitism and our role in preserving our Jewish identity.

Jewish life in Iran dates back over 2,500 years, with roots tracing to the Persian Empire under Cyrus the Great. For centuries, Jews in Persia were sometimes integrated, sometimes marginalized, but always enduring.

But, the overthrow of the Shah and rise of Ayatollah Khomeini during the 1979 Islamic Revolution changed everything. The regime views Jews, especially those who sympathize with Israel and the West, as internal enemies. Properties were confiscated, families were torn apart, and Jews were publicly executed after trials that lacked due process.

Habib Elghanian was the first Jew to be executed by the Islamic Republic for "friendship with the enemies of God." His death became a turning point: approximately 75% of the 80,000 Jews living in Iran fled the country in fear, leaving behind homes, businesses, heritage, and memories. Those who remained faced surveillance, restrictions on religious practice, and became second-class citizens.

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Los Angeles became the largest Persian Jewish diaspora in the world, along with Great Neck, New York, London, France, and Israel. Under the Law of Return, an estimated 20-

25,000 Iranian Jews immigrated to Israel during the 1980's and 1990's. Today, Israel is home to over 45,000 Jews of Iranian descent.

Persian Jews who fled Iran—or those who were raised by them—carry with them a sharpened instinct for danger. They have witnessed how religious and ideological extremism can easily translate into oppression and physical violence, often beginning with rhetoric that sounds justifiable on the surface.

Their political awareness is not theoretical, it is deeply personal and informed by the shared trauma of exile. These memories create a radar for antisemitism, even when it's hidden in language about "justice" or "resistance." For many activists on campus, the fight against antisemitism today is not just about defending Israel, it's about ensuring history doesn't repeat itself.

"Growing up Iranian Jewish, I learned both the fragility and the strength of Jewish life. So stepping into leadership for Zionism and for Israel felt natural," an anonymous Junior at the University of California, Los Angeles told me.

Second-generation Persian Jews grow up straddling two worlds: At home, they're grounded in deep cultural and religious tradition, while in public, they're immersed in liberal Western values. This dual perspective makes us uniquely sensitive to antisemitism coming from both extremes of the far right and left.

Nowhere is this more evident than on U.S. college campuses, where Persian Jewish students have become some of the most active and outspoken leaders in defending Israel and Jewish students, alike. In an environment where Jewish voices are often marginalized, Persian Jews often step into the void to push back against BDS campaigns because this activism is very personal to them.

"At times I face assumptions because my background does not fit a narrow picture of who Jews are, but that is exactly why Iranian Jewish voices matter." —Anonymous, University of California, Los Angeles

For many, this activism is personal. The ideological intolerance we see on American college campuses mirrors the silencing our parents and grandparents experienced in Iran. Our families taught us what it means to lose a homeland, and what it takes to protect one while abroad. Tight-knit family networks and strong communal institutions—whether synagogues or schools—create a support system that empowers individuals to speak out without the fear of isolation.

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“When the encampment hit UCLA, the response showed who we were. Westwood is surrounded by the largest diaspora of Persian Jews, and you saw kids, students, parents, and even grandmas out there rallying for Jewish students. For our community it was

personal. They remembered what happened the last time they saw antisemitism brewing in their own backyard, and they were not going to let it happen again." — Anonymous, University of California, Los Angeles

Alexandra Ahdoot, Founder and President of the Students Supporting Israel chapter on Duke University's campus, as well as a member of the Duke Persian Student Association (PSA) told me that she was, "raised on stories about how beautiful life in Iran was before my family left, as well as an education and deep understanding of the dangers of radical Islam. The current world climate, especially since October 7, 2023 and Israel's ongoing multi-front war, is simply a new manifestation of an ever-present root cause. The deep rooted hatred of democratic values which spurred the Iranian revolution in 1979 is the same that underlies the global tidal wave of hatred towards Israel and the Jewish people, coupled with the rapid spread of radical Islam's extreme ideology."

For many Persian Jews in the diaspora, the dream of a free, democratic Iran still lingers. The hope is that one day, the regime that displaced our families will fall, and the Iranian people, including its Jewish community, can live in harmony without fear. This hope fuels our activism by reminding us that silence is not an option anymore and that memory must become action whether in Tel Aviv, Tehran, or on our own college campuses in the US.

Ahdoot shared that, "as a Persian Jewish woman, I have always felt it is my duty to spread light amidst the darkness by being the loudest, proudest voice on behalf of Israel, the Jewish people, and the democratic values we fight for."

So now, as I begin my third year at the University of Texas at Austin and my second year as president of Longhorn Students for Israel, I am reminded that my voice is not only my own, but echoes of my parents and grandparents who know what it means to lose a homeland. I embrace living with dual awareness and urge others around me to lead, speak, and ensure the story of our people is not just told, just retold again and again for years to come.

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