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"We Were on Very Good Terms": A Look Back at Iran-Israel Relations

Retired Israeli diplomat Aryeh Levin has many fond memories from his years serving in Iran more than a half-century ago. As to the ongoing war between the countries, he says: "This is a crazy time we're living in."

Hillel Kuttler | 16.04.26



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Iran's former Consulate in Jerusalem, flying the "Lion and Sun" flag used before the Islamic Revolution, photographed in 1947 by Moshe Marlin Levin, the Meitar Collection, the Pritzker Family National Photography

Aryeh Levin was returning from a meeting when he stopped into a store in Karaj, a town just west of Tehran.

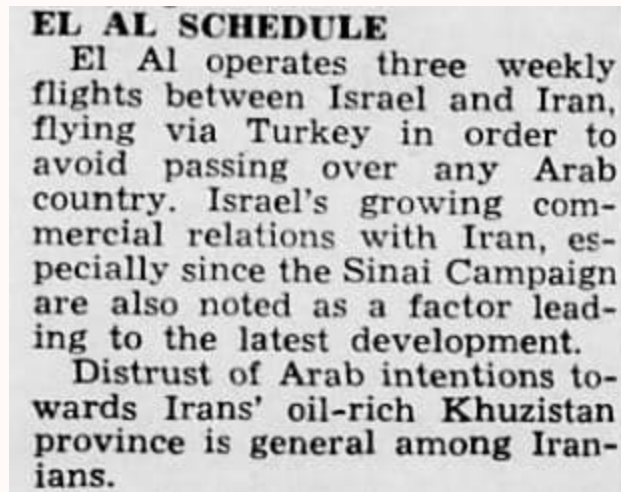
This was in the early 1970s and Levin was an Israeli diplomat posted to the embassy in the Iranian capital. Levin knew the country well and spoke Farsi fluently, having been born and raised in Tehran before moving to Israel at age 20.

In the store, a man in religious Muslim garb approached him and said, "I know you're Iranian."

The man didn't say it to intimidate Levin. Indeed, the two had a pleasant conversation, typical of Levin's diplomatic service in his homeland. In fact, Levin said in a phone call from his Jerusalem apartment, he often met freely with Iranians of all stripes, including observant Muslims.

"I knew many of them. I used to speak with them. We were on very good terms," he said. "I had many friends in Tehran."

Those were the days when Israel and Iran enjoyed diplomatic relations, commercial airplanes flew between the two capitals, business was done and the countries' militaries collaborated.



Three weekly flights between Israel and Iran – From the August 5, 1960 edition of the [Intermountain Jewish News](#), the Historical Jewish Press Collection at the National Library of Israel

That ended by 1979, when Muslim fundamentalists led a revolution that toppled Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Iranian king, or *Shah*.

The air-raid sirens shrieking throughout Israel in recent months to warn of incoming ballistic

missiles launched by Iran, the destroyed buildings in cities like Tel Aviv and Arad, the nine people murdered in one strike alone in Beit Shemesh — to say nothing of the lethal attacks and wars unleashed on Israel in the past few decades by Iranian proxies Hezbollah and Hamas, including since October 7, 2023 — make the once-peaceful period between Iran and Israel difficult to conjure.

The era of collaborative relations lasted officially for less than 20 years. The pro-West Shah took a risk in forging ties with Israel at a time that few in the Middle East did.



From [the July 29, 1960 edition of *The American Jewish World*](#), the Historical Jewish Press Collection at the National Library of Israel

When Iran recognized Israel diplomatically in mid-1960, Egypt's President, Gamal Abdel Nasser, recalled his ambassador to Tehran and accused Pahlavi of having ["sold himself to his master's imperialism and Zionism at a cheap price."](#)

ISRAEL DRAWS IRAN IN DAVIS CUP

MELBOURNE, Sunday: Israel is to play Iran in the first round of the European "Zone B" of the 1968 Davis Cup competition, with Iran the "home" country.

The draw was made by officials of the Lawn Tennis Association of Australia during the Australian championships at Kooyong last week-end.

Mr. W. Reid, LTAA Vice-President, representing Tasmania, announced the draw, and LTAA Secretary, Mr. J. A. C. Andrew, recorded it.

The winner of Iran-Israel would meet the winner of Austria and seeded nation South Africa.

Israel would be favoured to beat Iran in their first round tie, but could not survive the second round challenge against favoured South Africa.

Israel lost to Austria in Vienna two years ago, when star player Eleazar Davidman dropped out and Yoshua Shalem and Josef Stabholz made up the team.

All three have spent 9-12 months' training and coaching in Australia under Davis Cup captain Harry Hopman's

that she may refuse the necessary entrance arrangements to an Israeli team for the Davis Cup tie in Iran.

But tennis officials were hoping that easing tension in the Middle East would make the Iran-Israel tie possible.

It has to be finalised by May, 1968, with the winners to meet the qualifier of South Africa v. Austria by May 28.

Israel's team for the tie would almost certainly be Davidman and Stabholz, with former South African Ian Froman as likely doubles choice.

South Africa, whose top players include Jackle Saul and Robert Maud, has seeded



● Pictured: Israeli team members and Iranian wrestlers under the Israeli flag in the 1956 Olympic

Games Village at Heidelberg, Melbourne, Victoria. (David Attar photo.)

"Israeli team members and Iranian wrestlers under the Israeli flag in the 1956 Olympic Games Village..." from [the January 26, 1968 edition of The Australian Jewish News](#), the Historical Jewish Press Collection at the National Library of Israel

In that period, international Jewish charitable organizations, such as the Organization for Rehabilitation through Training (ORT) and the Joint Distribution Committee, operated openly in Iran. Approximately 61,000 Jews lived in Iran in 1966, compared to 15,000 today. Most Jews fled for the United States and Israel by the time Ruhollah Khomeini took over as Iran's supreme leader in 1979.

"Israeli manufacturers are being granted more and more orders from Iranian businessmen," read an article in the [November 2, 1962, issue of the Indiana Jewish Post and Opinion](#).

Iran didn't succumb to Arab pressure to cut ties with Israel, the article said, "realizing, instead, that the Jewish state and itself have much to offer each other." Iran, it added, had "requested wholesale technical assistance from Israel, primarily to rehabilitate the earthquake-stricken Qazvin region" in the country's northwest.

Israel Flies Drugs to Iran Quake Victims

JERUSALEM — President Ben Zvi sent a message to the Persian Shah expressing condolences to the Persian nation on behalf of the State and in his own name.

Emergency shipments of drugs were flown from Israel to Teheran for the earthquake victims.

Consignments of blankets and similar equipment were flown to Teheran by El Al. They must go by a circuitous route, to avoid crossing Arab territory.

Another shipment of six tons of medical supplies, food, clothing, tents and blankets was flown by El Al to Teheran in response to an appeal by the Persian authorities.

No Jewish community in Iran suffered as a result of the earthquake.

Israel's feeling of sympathy for Iran was prompted both by humanitarian feelings and by the fact that Iran maintains economic and political relations with Israel, despite Arab threats, said the Tel Aviv paper Hatzofe.

The Persian earthquakes cannot trigger a similar calamity

particularly concerned over the lack of proper building legislation to ensure the earthquake-proofing of new buildings. This has become of particular importance with the increasing height of Tel Aviv buildings.

JCC Must Meet \$1

Jewish Community Center leaders are active on a Collections Committee to collect building fund pledges prior to the October date when a \$100,000 payment to the bank comes

From [the September 14, 1962 edition of the Intermountain Jewish News](#), the Historical Jewish Press Collection at the National Library of Israel

Iran Invites Israel To Anniversary of King Cyrus

JERUSALEM (JTA)—Iran has invited Israel to participate in the 2,500th anniversary of the reign of King Cyrus, famous in Jewish history for permitting captive Jews to return from Babylon to Palestine in the period between the first and second Jewish commonwealths. The celebration will take place in 1961.

This article appeared in [the November 5th, 1959 edition of The Sentinel](#).

Interestingly, the 2500th anniversary celebrations of the reign of King Cyrus were eventually delayed by a decade, to 1971. By that point, Israel was no longer invited, [as you can read here](#), apparently in order to not antagonize Arab countries. The Historical Jewish Press Collection at the National Library of Israel

In fact, the Iranian people preferred that the countries' ties be expanded beyond where even the Shah had taken them. "Many Iranians are angered over this blackmail which the other Arab nations hold over their heads," the article said, citing an Israeli newspaper report. "Some have

spoken out against it vehemently.”

Iran Keeps Link With Israel Despite Pressure From Arabs

TEHERAN, Iran — Two armed policemen stand beside an unmarked door. Once inside the courtyard, behind a high cement wall, visitors are frisked, carefully identified and escorted into the building.

The Israeli Mission here has an unlisted telephone number and struggles to maintain what a European diplomat called “an invisible profile.” Yet the Israeli presence in Iran—like the delicate link between the two nations—has stirred discussion and rumor among diplomats, controversy among Iranians and deep anger from Arab countries, bespeaking Iran’s tenuous political position in the Middle East.

Several senior diplomats here, the Shah spoke with unusual candor last month about his relationship with Israel. He told Al Hawadess, a Beirut weekly, that there was “no contradiction” between Iran’s support for the Arabs and her economic ties with Israel.

“I see no benefit either for us or for you in closing Israel’s economic office in Teheran,” he said, directing his remarks at the Arabs. “Let us be frank. Deception is useless and the world is not governed by emotion.”

The Shah, whose interviews are often carefully timed, said: “If you think Iran is an important country, why do you not listen to us? Why do you not try to understand our

is known to be specially worried about the Soviet Union’s influence in Iraq and India, and about the trouble between Pakistani Government and Opposition leaders in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan, beside the Iranian border. Diplomats say that Israel provides a source of stable power on the Arabs’ western flank.

“Without Israeli power in the Middle East,” said a diplomatic source, “the Shah feels that the Arabs would be difficult to control and the Russians would very much gain an upper hand in the entire area.”

Although the Shah’s ties with Israel have stirred resentment among students and some intellec-

“Without Israeli power in the Middle East, the Shah feels that the Arabs would be difficult to control...” —

From the [January 11, 1974 edition of J. Jewish News of Northern California](#), the Historical Jewish Press Collection at the National Library of Israel

Embattled Shah assures Israel steady oil flow

The Shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, whose country has been torn by internal strife in recent months, publicly assured Israel last week that she could count on a continuing supply of oil.

The Shah made his remarks during a long-distance television interview with ABC news correspondent Barbara Walters. Speaking from Tehran, Iran's capital, the 58-year-old Shah told Walters he would not bow to Arab pressure to cut off Israel's oil supply.

Iran, a Moslem — but non-Arab — country, provides about 60 per cent of Israel's oil supply.

Iran once supplied some 60 percent of Israel's oil — from [the September 17, 1978, edition of *The Jewish Week*](#), the Historical Jewish Press Collection at the National Library of Israel

That squares with many Iranian citizens' warm views toward the Jewish state today, especially since Israel and the United States launched their joint attack against the regime's installations in February.

Levin, who will turn 96 in late April, said he remains calm when air-raid sirens blare. He and his wife close the shutters and walk calmly to their fortified room.

He figures that Israel is "not going to win this war" and that the Iranian regime isn't likely to be overthrown, at least not soon. "They will stay another 40, 50 years," he said.

"The machine will go round and round. It's called 'time.' There are many things we can't predict," Levin, who served in New York in the 1980s, said in fluent English. "We bombed them and bombed them. That makes no impression on the Iranians."

He added: "I hope that things will pass and some *seikhe!* [sense] will get into their heads eventually. This is a crazy time we're living in."

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