

## Iran Jews in Israel prefer Ahmadinejad

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Despite unrest and violence following last month's presidential elections in Iran, some Jewish Iranians living in Israel and abroad say life in the Islamic republic is better under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad than it would be under challenger Mir Hossein Mousavi.

At a conference of Iranian Jews in Jerusalem on Monday, leaders of the Mashadi Jewish community said that despite Ahmadinejad's blustery rhetoric against Israel, Iran is a safe place for Jews to practice their religion.

"Ahmadinejad speaks badly about Jews, but he is preferable to Mousavi," said Shlomo Zabihi, a Mashadi rabbi. The current government is relatively stable and provides a safe environment for Jews, he said.

Monday's event marked the first meeting of the Global Mashadi Jewish Federation, an umbrella organization of community and religious groups preserving the historical and cultural identity of Jews from Mashad, Iran's second largest city, with a population of about 2.5 million.

During the 1979 Islamic Revolution, many Mashadi Jews fled to the United States, primarily New York City - where some 6,000 Jews with ties to Mashad now live. There are almost no Jews in Mashad today, though an estimated 25,000 still live in Iran, concentrated in Teheran.

"They've found it very safe and pleasant, no problems," said Bahman Kamali, founder of the federation. "Actually, the regime during [the time of reformist president Mohammad] Khatami and the regime now have been very good with Jewish people. There has not been any problem."

Kamali said Ahmadinejad's calls for the destruction of Israel were not the same as condemnation or encouragement of violence against Jews in the Diaspora.

"There's a distinction between the two because Iranians, they respect the religions that have books, Christianity, Judaism," Kamali said. "They respect people freely going to the synagogues and praying there without any problems."

He doesn't think the Jewish community in Iran will face persecution stemming from political unrest following the disputed elections.

"I'm not concerned about that," said Kamali, who downplayed the political involvement of his group. "The purpose of this conference is not political. It's only our heritage, that we are proud of to be from Mashad, Iran, and we would like to preserve that."

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