

Iranian show trial concludes with harsh sentences against Jewish defendants

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The trial of thirteen Iranian Jews accused of spying for Israel concluded Saturday, when a judge in the southern city of Shiraz convicted ten and sentenced them to prison terms of four to thirteen years. Two Muslims accused of being accomplices were given more lenient jail terms of two years.

The culmination of the trial, which began last April, underscored the frame-up character of the proceedings. The defendants were convicted on charges of “cooperating with a hostile government, membership in an illegal (spy) ring and recruitment of new agents.” The court claimed the alleged Israeli spy ring was set up more than 20 years ago to collect military secrets.

But the 72-page verdict, read out to reporters and foreign diplomats, did not contain a single substantive piece of evidence of espionage, and relied instead on the nebulous claim that the defendants were guilty of “cooperation” with Israel. Defence lawyer Esmail Naseri-Mojarrad said the court had not proved that the defendants had access to classified information, let alone that they passed it on to Israel. “If they are not guilty of passing on information, exactly what kind of cooperation are they supposed to have given?” he asked.

From start to finish, the treatment of the defendants was a travesty of legal due process. Prior to the trial, the defendants were imprisoned for 15 months and denied access to legal counsel. The trial itself was held before a Revolutionary Court, whose proceedings are secret. The Revolutionary Court judge acts as investigator, prosecutor and judge, and even appoints the defence counsel.

The state's case has relied exclusively on confessions extracted from nine of the defendants, whose lawyers were not present at the time. Some of the 13 were arrested in January 1999, while others were jailed in

March of last year. Hamid “ Dani” Tefilin, a shoe salesman, and Asher Zadmehr, a senior religious leader, received 13-year sentences. Tefilin was the first to be arrested 18 months ago. He was held incommunicado for five months and was one of eight who confessed and were paraded before the cameras on national television before and during court proceedings.

Defence lawyers said their cross-examination of six of the accused showed that some of them had lied in their confessions. Some reports state that four of the defendants withdrew their admissions of guilt, saying they had been made under intense pressure from the authorities. The three Jewish defendants acquitted—Navid Balazadeh, Nejatollah Brukhimnejad and Tefilin's brother, Omid—had all refused to confess.

As well as Tefilin and Zadmehr, civil servant Nasser Leviham was sentenced to 11 years, store clerk Ramin Farzam to 10 and shopkeeper Javid Bent-Yacoub to 9. Shopkeeper Farhad Seleh and religion teachers Shahrokh Paknahad and Farzad Kashi received eight years each, and Faramarz Kashi was sentenced to five years. Ramin Nematizadeh, a shoe clerk, received four years. Iranian state television said the sentence included lashes or fines. But the court clerk who read out the official sentence told reporters none of the accused had been sentenced to lashes.

Two Muslims jailed for two years are Ali Akbar Safaei, an industrialist with military contacts, and Mehran Yousefi, a military officer. Two other Muslims were acquitted, while cases against five others remain open.

After months of virtual silence on the anti-Jewish frame-up, the US, Britain and the European Union issued statements condemning the court's verdict. The belated Western protests were largely pro forma, for the most part calling for the sentences to be reduced when

the case comes up for appeal some time in the next three weeks.

US Ambassador to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke told reporters, “This was a kangaroo proceeding”. But Holbrooke, along with the rest of the Clinton administration and US State Department, did not just discover last Saturday that the trial was a frame-up. Why did they tolerate it with only the mildest of criticisms for more than three months?

The 12 found guilty at Shiraz are victims not only of the machinations of Tehran's clerics, but also of Western *real politik*. Iran's religious leaders mounted the trial to whip up Islamic fanaticism and anti-Semitism in an attempt to bolster dwindling support for their regime, after suffering heavy defeats in recent elections at the hands of a more pro-Western “reform” clerical faction led by President Khatami. The US and Europe, as well as Israel, apparently decided it was inexpedient to make the anti-Jewish show trial an international issue, lest it weaken the Khatami faction and disrupt their plans for new business ventures in Iran and improved diplomatic relations with the Tehran regime. Khatami himself made no statements opposing the frame-up.

Meanwhile, there have been reports of increased repression and violence against Iran's Jewish community, including an arson attack on a textile shop in Tehran. Significantly, the court chose to deliver its verdict on the Jewish Sabbath.

Press reports on the verdict indicated that Western diplomats in Iran were somewhat surprised by the harsh sentences handed down by the Revolutionary Court. This would suggest that the US and other governments had been given private assurances that the judge would show leniency, in return for their near silence on the case. Major Jewish organisations in the US with close ties to the government had opposed the holding of public protests against the trial.

President Khatami is scheduled to visit Germany this month. A planned visit to Tehran by Britain's Foreign Secretary Robin Cook for July 4 was only cancelled at the last minute, three days before the verdict was delivered. It is clear that Cook stopped his visit only to avoid the embarrassment of being seen cuddling up to the Tehran government while it was announcing harsh sentences against the frame-up victims.

It is unlikely that America will be able to avoid some

form of diplomatic protest against Tehran. But Jon Alterman, program officer of research and studies at the US Institute of Peace, predicted that any action taken would be minimal. He stated that a death penalty would have solicited a clearer response from the US than jail sentences because, “If people believe the state of Iran is executing people for their religious beliefs, then that becomes a deal-breaker. But if the state of Iran is persecuting people—we have relations with a lot of countries which persecute people.”

Hossein Mussavi-Tabrizi, a close ally of Khatami, shared this appraisal of the trial's impact on US-Iranian relations. He was cited in an official newspaper stating, “The verdict is rational and equitable. It will not have a (negative) impact on (President Mohammad Khatami's) government and its policy of détente.”

Perhaps the most extraordinary expression of the West's de facto tolerance of the show trial has been the editorial silence of the *New York Times*. As of July 2, the day after the announcement of the verdict, the “newspaper of record” had chosen not to make a single editorial comment on the 13-week trial.



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