"I Have Two Homelands": Constructing Iranian Jewish and Persian Israeli Identities

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Israel and the Islamic Republic of Iran have had a problematic relationship for the last four decades. Despite their tense relations, Israel is home to thousands of Persians and Iran has the second largest Jewish population in the Middle East. There are social, political and psychological obstacles to dual identification. Using qualitative thematic analysis and Identity Process Theory, this article examines the construction and management of Persian/Iranian and Jewish/Israel identities among these groups. The following themes are discussed: (1) The Challenges and Maintenance of Dual Identification, (2) Breaking Down Boundaries Between Identities, and (3) Persian/Iranian or Jewish/Israel? Establishing Coherence in Identity. Results suggest that, while the social and political institutions in Iran and Israel construct barriers to dual identification, individuals deploy creative strategies for constructing an ethnic identity that acknowledges both components of their heritage. The implications for self-identity are discussed.

Keywords: multiple identities, Jewish studies, ethnic identity, identity conflict, social psychology

Iran and Israel share similarities in their ideological stances on how ethno-cultural minorities should relate to the nation state. Both countries are culturally diverse – Iran is home to numerous ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic groups, such as the Kurds, Azeris, and others, while Israel has, over the period of a century, incorporated into its population Ashkenazi, Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews from all over the world. Yet, both countries also expect assimilation to the dominant ethno-cultural paradigm – an Islamo-Persian identity in the case of Iran (Samii, 2000) and an Israeli-Jewish identity in the case of Israel (Smooha, 2002). The dominant expectation is that one is first and foremost *an Iranian* or *an Israeli*, rather than an Azeri or a Moroccan, for instance. Moreover, despite the tense relations between the two countries, Iran is in fact home to the second largest Jewish population in the Middle East, and up to a quarter of a million Israelis claim to have some Persian ancestry.

There has been much research into cultural identity among various ethno-cultural groups in Israel (e.g. Lerner, 2011; Peled, 1998; Singh, 2009) and, to a lesser extent, among minority groups in Iran (e.g. Elling, 2013; Samii, 2000; Sanasarian, 2000). However, in an ideological context in which assimilation is required and in which Iranian/Persian and Israeli/Jewish identities are socially represented as incompatible, it is unclear how Iranian Jews and Persian Israelis perceive and manage cultural diversity within the self-concept, and how they make sense of "incompatible" identities. Through the qualitative accounts of Iranian Jews and Persian Israelis based in Iran and Israel, this article explores the multiple ways in which ethnicities are constructed, challenged and managed within the self.

Iran and Israel: from friends to foes
In order to understand the sociological and political context in which Iranian Jews and Persian Israelis construct and manage their identities, it is necessary to explore the development of historical and political relations between Israel and Iran. Shahvar (2009) describes the long-standing antisemitism of Shiite Islam (which is the dominant denomination of Islam in Iran) which has persisted in present-day Iran. For instance, during the Qajar dynasty (1785-1925), Iranian Jews faced blood libel accusations, persecution, forced conversions – the forced conversion of Mashadi Jews to Islam in 1839 being an infamous case - and even pogroms (Levy, 1999; Tsadik, 2005, 2010). However, the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-79) is generally considered a "golden age" for Iranian Jewry. This

improvement in the treatment of Jews has been attributed to the decreased influence of Shia clergymen, which also saw the abolishment of forced conversions to Islam and the notion that non-Muslims were "najes" (unclean). Although approximately a third of Iranian Jews emigrated to the State of Israel in the years following its establishment (Lesham & Shuval, 1998), the remaining Jews in Iran generally ascended the socio-economic ladder and established themselves as an important ethno-religious group in science, education and commerce in Iran.

When David Ben-Gurion declared the independence of the State of Israel on 14 May 1948, Iran became the second Muslim-majority country (after Turkey) to recognize the newly established state, and the two countries came to enjoy bilateral relations. As two non-Arab countries in the predominantly Arab Middle East, Iran and Israel became natural allies, which was consistent with Ben-Gurion's notion of the *Alliance of the Periphery* (Ram, 2009). Indeed, Israel had a permanent delegation in Tehran which served as its de-facto embassy, and there were important economic and military collaborations between the two countries.

In 1979, Khomeini successfully led the Islamic Revolution, which deposed the Shah of Iran and installed a theocratic regime in Iran. Anti-Zionism became a key ideological component of Iranian foreign policy and all ties were cut with the State of Israel. Since then, the Iranian government has systematically referred to the Jewish State by delegitimizing terms, such as the "Zionist regime" and "Occupied Palestine," and has called for its destruction (Jaspal, 2014b). In addition to its active dissemination of delegitimizing social representations, Iran is a major funder of organizations committed to the destruction of Israel (Palmer-Harik, 2004). Although Iran recognises the Jews as an official religious minority and rejects accusations of antisemitism, the former Iranian president's repeated denial of the Holocaust, coupled with the often interchangeable use of the categories "Jew" and "Zionist" in political discourse, has led some commentators to argue that antisemitism is widespread in Iranian state ideology (Michael, 2007).

On the other hand, Israel has repeatedly threatened military action against Iran, which could be attributed to what Bar-Tal (2000) calls the Israeli siege mentality, that is, the widespread societal belief that outgroups (and particularly Iran) unanimously intend to inflict harm and damage on Israel, that Israelis cannot rely on outgroups for help, and that Israel is, therefore, alone in a hostile and threatening world. Research has found that Israelis of all backgrounds view Iran as the "prototype" of antisemitism because of its outspoken rejection of the State of Israel as well as the Iranian government's repeated Holocaust denial (Jaspal, 2014a). Moreover, the political and public perception in Israel that Iran is pursuing a nuclear weapons programme and that the international community is not doing enough to curtail this has further accentuated the siege mentality, precipitating public support for pre-emptive military action against Iran (Ram, 2009).

Israeli-Iranian relations have undergone significant changes over the last few decades – the two states have gone from being friends to foes. Given the prominent representation of intergroup threat in the mass media, political rhetoric and societal thinking (Jaspal & Coyle, 2014; Klein, 2009), coupled with the ideology of assimilation that underpins both nation-states, it is likely that self-identification as both Persian/Iranian *and* Jewish/Israeli could present potential social and psychological challenges.

Cultural Diversity in Iran and Israel
Cultural diversity is characteristic of Israel and Iran alike. While there have been several insightful studies of Israeli Jewish communities, such as Russians, Ethiopians, Indians and others, there are few English-language empirical studies of Jews of Persian descent (e.g. Philips & Khalili, 1995; Goldstein, 1998) and none that have examined the identities of both Iranian Jews and Persian Israelis.

Today, Iran has the largest Jewish population in the Middle East outside of Israel - recent estimates suggest that approximately 25,000 Jews remain in Iran (Jaspal, 2014a). As a recognized official Iranian religious minority, the Jewish people are allocated one seat in the Iranian parliament (majles). Moreover, Jews in Iran receive some institutional support from the Iranian authorities – there are several active synagogues across the country, Jewish schools, hospitals and publications. However, there have been reports of antisemitism existing at both social and institutional levels (Shahvar, 2009). For instance, some Jews reportedly feel scrutinised by the Iranian authorities and fear accusations of collaboration with Israel, which can make them feel uneasy about speaking openly about their living conditions in Iran.[1]

The acculturation ideology underpinning the State of Israel is primarily an assimilationist one, which divides Israelis into the categories of Jew and Arab. Although there is some acknowledgement of diversity within the Jewish majority, primarily in terms of the categories Ashkenazi (European descent), Sephardic (Iberian, North African, Turkish descent) and Mizrahi (Middle Eastern, Asian descent), the diversity *within* these categories is often overlooked. Given the centrality of (secular) Ashkenazi Jewry to the Zionist project, this ethno-cultural group has historically been prioritized in Israel (Sasson-Levy & Shoshana, 2013), and the "civilizing mission" of Zionism aimed to "salvage" the Mizrahi Jews by removing them from their exilic conditions and relocating them to the modern State of Israel (see Smooha, 2008). Ram (2009) describes the orientalist concept of negation of exile whereby Jewish life outside of Israel is regarded as exilic and incomplete. This is further reiterated by the Hebrew expression "la'asot aliya" (לעשות עליה), which constructs settlement in the Land of Israel is a spiritual ascent. Thus, emigration to Israel and assimilation to the Ashkenazi cultural ideal are viewed as necessary for Jews (Sasson-Levy & Shoshana, 2013).

Indeed, accounts of Jewish life in Iran tend to emphasise hardship and persecution, which can simplify the Iranian Jewish experience (e.g. Menashri, 1991). However, these commentators have also observed that, of all of the Mizrahi migrant groups in Israel, the Iranians are the most committed to their Iranian cultural origins. For instance, Netzer (1981, p.26-27) noted "Iranian Jews are attached to the state and culture of Iran […] The mother tongue of the Iranian Jew is Persian. He values it and he thinks and creates in that language," and that "[t]he Jews sought with all their might to look Iranian. They strove hard to identify with the values and symbols of secular Iranian nationalism, on the one hand, and to remain Jewish in their religion, on the other hand" (Netzer, 1988, p.13). In the absence of recent empirical research, it is unclear how Jews self-identify in a contemporary Iran in which mainstream nationalism is neither secular nor accommodating of non-Muslim majorities.

Goldstein's (1998) research into Iranian ethnic identity in Israel has identified a revival in ethnic consciousness among young Israeli adults of Iranian descent. It is noteworthy that this research was conducted during an era of decreased tensions between Iran and Israel, and it is unclear how Israelis of Iranian ethnicity construct their identities in a context of renewed political tension (due partly to the enduring negative effects of Ahmadinejad's presidency and Iran's nuclear programme) in which the possibility of war has been widely discussed.

Cultural diversity and the self-concept
Acculturation research demonstrates the important interactions between not only state ideology and the acculturation orientations of minorities, but also between the acculturation preferences of the host majority and those of minorities (Bourhis et al., 1997). While this

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[1] http://www.israelhayom.com/site/newsletter_article.php?id=6065

work explains how acculturation and cultural diversity function within societies, there is less research into how these social processes function at an individual level. Chryssochoou (2014) has argued that Identity Process Theory from social psychology can enable us to understand and theorise how individuals themselves internalize and manage acculturation and cultural diversity within the self-concept.

As a social constructivist framework, Identity Process Theory (Breakwell, 1986) conceptualizes identity as an ever-changing product of both sociological and psychological processes and the interactions between them. Individuals construct their identities in ways that provide them with optimal levels of culturally esteemed "identity principles" – these include (1) self-esteem, (2) distinctiveness, (3) continuity, and (4) self-efficacy. Moreover, at a psychological level though this is determined largely by societal conventions, individuals must perceive a degree of *coherence* between elements of their identities. For instance, self-identification as both Iranian and Jewish may challenge the coherence of identity in the Islamic Republic of Iran, where Iranian national identity is predicated on the Islamo-Persian ideal. Managing cultural diversity in the self-concept may pose challenges for the aforementioned identity principles, which will in turn motivate individuals to attempt to restore them (Breakwell, 1986). Accordingly, this article explores how Iranian Jews and Persian Israelis manage cultural diversity within the self despite stigma surrounding such diversity.

METHOD

Fifteen Israelis of Persian heritage who resided in Tel Aviv (Israel), and 13 Iranian Jews based in Tehran (Iran) were invited to participate in an in-depth semi-structured interview study concerning "the Iranian Jewish/ Israeli Persian identity experience". The 28 interviewees were aged between 18 and 30 (mean=26, SD=3.3). Of the 15 Israelis, 10 were male and 5 were female and, of the Iranians, 8 were male and 5 were female. As part of the interview, respondents were asked to describe their connection (if any) with relevant social categories: all of them described themselves as either "moderately" religious Jews; 10 Iranians described their Iranian identities as "important" while 3 described it as "not very important"; all 15 Israelis described their Israeli national identities as "very important"; all of the Israelis described their Persian ethnic identities as either "fairly" or "very" important; and all of the participants were either "fairly" or "very" politically engaged. The sample was relatively educated – all of the respondents had completed, or were studying towards, a university degree.

The interview schedule tapped into: (i) self-identity, and particularly ethnic, religious and national identification; (ii) knowledge of Iran and Israel; (iii) the potential challenges of the aforementioned forms of identification in particular social contexts; (iv) potential connections between relevant identities, and (v) perceptions of relevant outgroups and intergroup relations. The Israeli participants were all interviewed in Tel Aviv – at either their homes at on the Bar-Ilan University campus. The Iranian respondents were interviewed over Skype or the telephone. The interviews were conducted in either Hebrew or Persian, and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis, which has been described as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). The study aimed to capture participants' attempts to make sense of their personal and social worlds, with particular foci upon the construction of ethno-cultural identities and the connections between them. During the analytic phase, preliminary interpretations were noted in the left margin of each transcript. These included *inter alia* participants' meaning-making, particular forms of language, and apparent contradictions and

patterns within the data. Initial codes aimed to capture participants' perceptions and experiences in relation to their identities. The right margin was then used to collate these initial codes into potential themes, which captured the essential qualities of the accounts. This process was repeated for each transcript and eventually a list of superordinate themes, reflecting the major themes identified in both individual transcripts and the entire dataset, was developed and is described in this article. The list of superordinate themes was reviewed rigorously against the data in order to ensure their compatibility and numerous interview extracts were listed against each corresponding theme.

Participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms. Their pseudonyms, national identities and genders are indicated in the extracts below. In the quotations, an ellipsis indicates where material has been excised; and other material within square brackets is clarificatory.

ANALYSIS

The challenges and maintenance of dual identification
The interviewees described the challenges of ethnic and national co-identification due to the negative social representations associated with Iranian identity in Israel, on the one hand, and of the negative representations of Israel in Iran, on the other. Psychologically and culturally valued identities were rendered problematic in both national contexts:

> *I have two homelands in my view. If you ask me what I am, well, I'm half and half. Iranian and Israeli...Of course, it's a big challenge. Israel hates Iran, my homeland, and Iran also hates us* (Avi,Israeli,male)

> *I'm not Israeli. I'm an Iranian and I'm very proud of this fact but as a Jewish Iranian, Israel does have a special place in my identity but you can't say this ever. You can just feel it* (Babak,Iranian,male)

The use of terms such as "homeland" and "special place" in relation to both Israel and Iran illustrated their cultural and psychological importance. Moreover, Avi described himself as "half and half", thereby appending a similar degree of importance to both facets of his identity and rejecting the notion of a hierarchy. This attests to the importance of both national and ethnic identification even in a context in which Israeli national identity is clearly the culturally valued identity. Similarly, although Babak did not self-identify as Israeli, he did append significance to Israel as a symbol of his Jewishness. This is in stark contrast to the social representation of Israel as an illegitimate state in Iranian political and public consciousness and to the government-supported notion that Iranian Jews are invariably opposed to Israel (Shahvar, 2009). Although the Iranian participants clearly held a distinct social representation of Israel and regarded this as a symbol of Jewish identity, this representation was in conflict with their Iranian national identity, at least in the public domain, as highlighted by Babak. Similarly, Avi regarded his "half and half" identity as challenging because of tense Israeli-Iranian relations. Despite these challenges, interviewees derived social psychological benefits from dual identification:

> *Kids used to make fun of me at school. Like "what's this food you eat?" and "this language you speak" and "you're a stingy Persian", you know, the stereotypes. I just wanted to speak Hebrew and just be an Israeli...It [being Iranian] makes me feel good now. It didn't before it does now. I'm proud* (David,Israeli,male)

> *It's so important for us to remain who we are because the government pushes towards uniformity* (Arezoo,Iranian,female)

Like David, the majority of Israelis and Iranians derived self-esteem from their Iranian and Jewish identities, respectively. Although there was widespread consensus that social representations of these identities were negative especially in school contexts, individuals had developed strategies for focussing on the positive aspects of these identities and thereby derived a positive self-conception from them (Gecas, 1982). For instance, David described his experiences of being teased because of his overt adherence to Iranian cultural norms. Moreover, he reported that his individual identity was obscured by group-level stereotypes regarding Persians. This compelled him to desire assimilation to what he perceived as "Israeli culture" and consequential disidentification from his Iranian heritage, as Zionist ideology suggests (Smooha, 2002). However, David reported satisfaction with his Iranian heritage and this now constituted a source of self-esteem. Similarly, for Arezoo, her Jewish identity was central to her self-concept, which she explained in reference to the government's attempt to establish uniformity among Iranians. Thus, the manifestation of her Jewish identity provided a means of safeguarding distinctiveness from others.

Ethnic identification can provide individuals with a sense of continuity over time (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2012). By speaking Persian and utilising other Iranian cultural aspects, some of the Israeli respondents were able to derive continuity:

> *I used to hate speaking Persian because the kids at school would just laugh and make fun…Now I speak it much more and I answer my mother in Persian when she speaks to me in Hebrew…It's my way of keeping the link* (Sara,Israeli,female)

Like David, Sara too reported stigma in relation to her Persian ethnic identity, particularly her schooling experience, which had induced a desire to attenuate her connection with Iranian culture. However, in adulthood, she developed a desire to use the Persian language with her Iranian-born mother (Goldstein, 1998). Indeed, there was a perception among several interviewees that their Persian heritage and ethnic identity were challenged by the hegemony of (Ashkenazi) Israeli national identity (Sasson-Levy & Shoshana, 2013). Like Sara, several respondents reported the gradual loss of their Persian heritage, which they exemplified by citing their Iranian-born parents' gradual preference for the Hebrew language in accordance with the assimilationist orientation of Israel. Thus, by continuing to speak the Persian language, some individuals believed that they were "keeping the link" with their heritage and maintaining its continuity into the future.

The desire to maintain a connection with one's ethnic and cultural heritage was often exemplified by the desire to reconnect, at least psychologically, with others of Persian descent, thereby defying the taboo surrounding Iranian-Israeli relations:

> *Iranian food, it's a beautiful cuisine. Why should we be ashamed of this? I'm not. I love Korme Sabzi. It's something we have in common with Iranians, to say "we eat the same"* (Liran,Israeli,male)

> *We still keep the link with Israel. We listen to Radio Israel in our own home and we discuss Israel in our religious class…In Iran we're not always being watched. You should be careful but it's possible* (Behruz,Iranian,male)

Liran viewed his penchant for Iranian cuisine as a unifying bond with Iranians, that is, as a means of connecting with others in his ethnic group. This enabled some Israelis to derive a

sense of *belonging* within Persian culture, despite the common representation of Israelis as "Other" in Iran (Shahvar, 2009). Like other Persian Israelis who pointed to the "beauty" of the Persian language, Liran emphasised the "beautiful cuisine" of Iran and its ability to evoke pride, rather than shame. Thus, by engaging in common cultural practices (e.g. eating Persian food), all of which induced pride, individuals were able to liberate themselves from the stigma that they had previously experienced.

A similar observation can be made in relation to the accounts of Iranian Jews, many of whom defied the dominant social representation of Israel as "Other" by engaging in cultural practices that facilitated self-alignment with Israel, a symbolically important identity element. For instance, Behruz explicitly invoked his desire to "keep the link with Israel", despite Iran's curtailment of any communication with Israel. Respondents reported listening to Israeli radio in order to maintain a sense of connection with Israel. Given the tensions between the two states and the lack of communication between their respective peoples, several respondents reported their attempts to keep abreast of developments in Israel by listening to Israeli radio. Moreover, they maintained a connection with Israel by discussing it in religious classes and in "safe" Jewish forums in Iran to avoid detection from the Iranian authorities. Although Behruz acknowledged the necessity of exercising caution in manifesting his connection to Israel, he noted that it was possible to do so within primarily Jewish contexts.

Some individuals clearly derived a sense of safety and security from the knowledge that Israel existed as a Jewish State, that is, as a safe haven for world Jewry. Although some defensively emphasised the safety of Jews in Iran, there was also some acknowledgement of the political volatility of Iran, exemplified, in their view, by the tendency of the Iranian government to scapegoat minority groups. Consequently, the existence of Israel represented a psychological "exit option" or, as in the words of one respondent, a "back-up option" in the event of extreme political instability. Furthermore, interviewees referred to threats faced by Jews and other minority groups in view of the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) group:

> *They [ISIS] killed all the Iraqis in the Sinjar because they were minorities and they've gone far, far into Syria and Iraq. You can never trust the past and guess the future. If they came to Iran, the Jews would be killed first and then everyone else…Jews are safe in Israel* (Aziz, Iranian, male)

Like Aziz, several respondents described the fears and uncertainties about the political future of Iran and the region, more generally, and concurred in their perception of Israel as a safe haven for the Jewish people. They substantiated their fears by describing violence against the Yazidi people at the hands of ISIS in Northern Iraq due to their religious minority status. Individuals were sceptical about the safety of Jews in Iran, and some of them perceived the mass genocide of Iranian Jews at the hands of ISIS as plausible. Yet, like Jahan and Aziz, interviewees regarded Israel as a beacon of hope amid fear and uncertainty. Despite their disagreement with some Israeli policies, they nevertheless rejected the notion that Israel should be destroyed. After all, many perceived Israel as the Jewish homeland.

Breaking Down Boundaries Between Identities
In attempting to reconcile seemingly divergent identities, some individuals may seek to establish connections or commonalities between them (Amiot et al., 2007). In view of the social and psychological functions performed by identification with the stigmatised category, it was unsurprising that individuals should attempt to maintain this connection despite social and political challenges:

In Iran it's OK to be Jewish even though the media says it's not…We cannot speak in favour of Israel but they can't tell what is in your mind and in your heart and we cannot think the way they [government supporters] think about Israel (Farrokh,Iranian,male)

I'm Iranian but I'm also part of the Jewish nation…Every day that I pray and…maintain our customs, I show that I'm part of the Jewish nation and this lives on…We will not disappear (Firoozeh,Iranian,female)

Most Iranian Jewish participants laid claim to their Iranian national identity, often in the form of a sentimental national attachment (Kelman, 1997), in addition to their Jewish ethno-religious identity, and rejected the notion that these identities were in any way incompatible. For instance, Farrokh responded defensively to the interviewer's suggestion that there might be tensions between these identities and attributed this perception to erroneous media reporting. Similarly, Firoozeh emphasized her membership in the "Jewish nation" in addition to her Iranian national identity and challenged negative assumptions about Iran. Interviewees noted that, while it was possible for the Iranian authorities to regulate public manifestations of support, it was conversely impossible for them to regulate *private* manifestations of support or connection. Firoozeh and others reported doing so privately, often in prayer, and in cultural practice. Thus, the symbolic attachment to Israel clearly possessed a religious dimension, which itself had been accentuated among Iranian Jewry in the wake of the Iranian Revolution that rendered salient religious identities (Sanasarian, 2000).

In order to maintain a sense of ethno-cultural continuity in the face of growing tensions between their identities, individuals sought to blur the reified boundaries between them. Persian Israelis were particularly aware of the tensions characterising Iranian-Israeli relations and perceived the Iranian authorities, rather than the Iranian people, as responsible for these tensions:

We do not blame the people in Iran. It's a mad government. They do not reflect what the people think…I don't think Iranian people hate us because we have many similarities in fact. They are brainwashed…We used to live, my parents told me, we used to live side by side, and in the same street so Persians, Jewish or Muslim or Zoroastrian, we're all one and in Israel we can live like this, the government loves freedom (Nati,Israeli,male)

The Iranian government was dismissed as "mad" and unrepresentative of the Iranian people, while anti-Zionism in Iranian society was seen as the outcome of a political programme of brainwashing. All of the interviewees had been exposed to narratives of positive intergroup relations between Persians of different faiths from relatives who had lived in Iran prior to the Islamic Revolution. They drew strategically upon these social representations in order to affirm their belief in the possibility of positive intergroup relations and the sense of ethnic "one-ness" that respondents desired.

Among Iranian Jews, there was a sense of alienation from both the Iranian authorities and the Israeli government, which allowed them to focus on "the people" and thereby break down the perceived boundaries between their identities:

The things that they [the Iranian government] say about the Holocaust, it shows what kind of people they are. This is not my history, my identity or my people…Israel's

government and many of them it's about war and power and control so it's hard for me to see how they can represent the Jewish people. (Esta,Iranian,female)

Israel is bad and Iran is bad. They are both bad. The government, yes, but not the people. The people of both are good. Iranians are "one". (Morteza,Iranian,male)

Esta and Morteza delineated Iranian/Israeli politics from the Persian people and argued that neither government adequately represented the Persian people. This allowed them to emphasise the unity of the Persian people (both Jewish and non-Jewish) and to externally attribute the apparent emerging disunity of the people to the policies of these governments. Like Esta, several Iranian interviewees exemplified the distasteful nature of the Iranian government's repeated Holocaust denial, which was not seen as characteristic of Iranian thinking or history (Litvak, 2006). Conversely, individuals perceived Israel as defensive and belligerent, traits that they did not view as characteristic of the Jewish people. Interestingly, while most Israelis were highly critical of the Iranian government but rather defensive of the Israeli government (as exemplified by Nati's account above), Iranian Jews appeared to disidentify from both. Their accounts evidenced a sense of political fatigue and a desire to re-focus on Persian (Jewish) *society.* This could be attributed more generally to the siege mentality that has been described in relation to Israeli society (Bar-Tal, 2000).

Although Iranian Jews were often critical of the Israeli government's policies, many were also ambivalent about Israel. On the one hand, they recognised the stigma surrounding any sense of identification with Israel but, on the other, there was some unease about the overt demonization of Israel observable in Iran:

"Israel" is like a bad word for Iran so I think of us as the Jewish people only and we are all connected (Dilshad,Iranian,male)

When they say "death to Israel", yes, it makes us feel insecure and we don't like it. We don't want to say these words…However, the government of Israel takes many bad decisions and this makes the problem worse because we cannot have a relationship with the people of Israel who are Jews like us (Jahan,Iranian,male)

Some respondents accepted the stigma surrounding identification with Israel and, in accordance with Iran's policy of using terms such as "Occupied Palestine", avoided references to Israel/the Jewish State (Jaspal, 2014b). Dilshad, for instance, recognised that Israel had become a "bad word for Iran". Instead, he referred to "the Jewish people", which included both Israelis and world Jewry who, in his view, were "all connected" by their ethno-religious identity. This constituted a creative means of delineating society and politics. However, like most Iranian interviewees, Dilshad and Jahan did recognise Israel as the *Jewish* State and therefore took offence at Iran's frequent political chants calling for the destruction of the State of Israel. Examples like this highlight the socio-psychological need for establishing coherence in identity.

Persian/Iranian or Jewish/Israeli? Establishing coherence in identity
There are widespread cultural perceptions of mutual threat between Israel and Iran (Klein, 2009). This can create tensions between Iranian-Persian and Israeli-Jewish identities, which, as exemplified by the data presented in this article, individuals endeavoured to synthesise and reconcile:

> *I say "Persian" and when I think of this, I don't know, I think more about the people and great culture and civilization of Persia…Iran has got these negative connotations for me because I just think of Ayatollah and hatred of Jews* (Talya,Israeli,female)

Respondents were asked to reflect upon their use of the Hebrew term "Parsi" [פרסי] (Persian) rather than "Irani" [אירני] (Iranian) in self-definition. Tayla described the positive social representations associated with the term Persian, which evoked imagery of the "great culture and civilization of Persia". For most individuals, the term Persian represented a *cultural* category with emphases on history and society, rather than politics. Conversely, the terms "Iran" and "Iranian" evoked negative social representation due to the association, in the minds of participants, with theocratic politics, the Ayatollah, and antisemitism (Shahvar, 2009). It is noteworthy that the Israeli, and even some of the Iranian, respondents perceived the Iranian theocratic regime as antisemitic, exemplified by reference to state-sanctioned Holocaust denial in Iran. Given that the category "Iran" appeared to activate negative and threatening social representations in people's minds, many felt uncomfortable accommodating this category in their identities, preferring the more culturally-oriented category "Persian". As a category devoid of any political connection, "Persian" was more readily accommodated in identity. Similarly, among Iranian Jews, there was a clear preference for categories and terms that evoked imagery of Judaism, rather than Israel, because of the socio-political difficulties surrounding public manifestations of identification with Israel.

The Israeli respondents attempted to re-construe their Persian identity in order to render it more compatible with their Israeli identity:

> *I prefer not to think about the situation [in Iran] now. Why should we focus on Iran after 1979? Why not the beautiful history of Iran that there was before and that there still is in the culture? This makes me proud to be Persian* (Yasmin,Israeli,female)

Yasmin disengaged from negative social representations of Iran by refusing to think about post-1979 Iran. She questioned the necessity of focussing on post-Revolution Iran, rather than the "beautiful history of Iran" that had preceded it, and the long-standing positive aspects of Persian culture which are often overshadowed by negative social representations of Iran. Some respondents nostalgically reminisced about the Shah's era, which has been described as the "golden age" for Iranian Jewry (Shahvar, 2009). Persian Israelis had access to social memories of pre-1979 Iran due to cultural artefacts in Persian Jewish contexts in Israel, e.g. the displaying of photos of pre-1979 Iran in restaurants and cafeterias. These social memories enabled them to derive pride and, crucially, self-esteem from their Persian heritage.

As an identity that could provide feelings of self-esteem, respondents were more able to perceive linkage between it and their (more established) Israeli identity:

> *We are really quite different from the other groups in Israel. We speak our language. We have our culture and we are proud of it…For us, there's no competition with being Israeli at all* (Tal,Israeli,male)

The state ideology of Israel is an assimilationist one and that there is, thus, an implicit cultural expectation that Israelis will abandon their ethnic backgrounds in favour of a shared Israeli identity (Bourhis & Dayan, 2004). Tal and others highlighted the distinctiveness of Persian Israelis vis-à-vis Israelis of other backgrounds in that Persian tend to retain their cultural and linguistic heritage more readily than other groups. Given that this may be viewed as problematic in assimilationist societies where the abandonment of subordinate cultures is

socially normative, several interviewees spoke of a long-standing compatibility between their Israeli national and Persian ethno-cultural identities between which "there's no competition." By naming and, thus, constructing their connection with Iran in favourable terms, Israelis were able to synthesise their ethno-religious and ethno-national identities.

To further enhance identity coherence, both Iranians and Israelis manifested a tendency to assign distinct "functions" or roles to each of their identities:

> *Iran is my home because I was born here. My family is here…but I think Israel is a land of opportunity for me because my life is limited in Iran…Israel is a safe country for Jews* (Behruz,Iranian,male)

Behruz clearly perceived Iran as "home" and wished to continue to live in Iran but, like many Iranians, he discussed the possibility of emigrating to Israel. However, in practical terms, he regarded Israel as a foreign country and, thus, emigration as a "big step". His perception of Iran as "home" and Israel as a "land of opportunity" echoed Kelman's (1997) distinction between sentimental and instrumental forms of national attachment – while some respondents clearly held a sentimental and emotional attachment to Iran, the country in which they had been socialised, they simultaneously perceived an important connection to Israel due partly to the social, political and economic opportunities that the country offered them as Jews. Moreover, the psychological security that Israel could offer also contributed to respondents' sense of identification with the country. In short, the two identities – Iranian and Israeli – were present in the identity structure but clearly held different meanings and performed distinct psychological functions:

> *I'm Iranian and my origins are in Iran. It's important to me. My soul is Jewish and Israel is related to the soul. Also very important* (Arezoo,Iranian,female)

> *Wherever a Jew is, Israel means something because it's part of our birthright, I believe. Each Jew has a place on earth where they lived and sort of what we became, if you understand me, our identity* (Asaf,Israeli,male)

By describing a component of identity concerned with her "origins" and another focused on her "soul", Arezoo distinguished between her ethnic and spiritual "selves", respectively (see William, 1890). She regarded her Iranian identity as pertinent to her ethnic self and, like most Iranian respondents, attributed significance to this component of identity. Conversely, her Jewishness and indeed her attachment to Israel, a country she had never visited, were attributed to her spiritual self. The two selves were viewed as equally important in constituting her identity – one simultaneously possesses both an ethnicity and a soul (William, 1890). By attributing the two potentially conflicting identities (Jewish/Israeli and Iranian) to distinct "selves" or components of the identity structure, thereby creating a form of compartmentalisation within identity (Roccas & Brewer, 2002), Arezoo was quite able to perceive these selves as compatible and harmonious in identity.

Asaf, an Israeli, engaged in a similar psychological process - he perceived Jewishness and Israeliness as pertinent to the spiritual self, given Israel's connection with the "birthright" of all Jews, regardless of their location or background. Like Arezoo, he viewed his country of origin as important in defining the distinctiveness of his identity (vis-à-vis Israelis of other backgrounds). The spiritual self was constructed as being immutable and general to all Jews, while one's country of origin defined "what we become", that is, the individuality and distinctiveness that each (Jewish) *ethnic* group comes to possess. This was, thus, a source of distinctiveness in an assimilationist context in which intergroup difference is attenuated

(Vignoles et al., 2002). In short, both components of identity were regarded as making important contributions to identity and, thus, *necessarily* compatible.

DISCUSSION

This study explored how multiple identities are constructed, experienced and managed among Iranian Jews and Israeli Persians, respectively. Identity Process Theory (Breakwell, 1986) provides the heuristic tools for understanding how these social psychological processes function at an individual level against the backdrop of dominant social representations (including state ideology and perceptions of the "Other"). The theory allows us to integrate the social and psychological levels of analysis, which has been largely absent from mainstream social sciences research into identity (Moghaddam, 2002). Identity Process Theory enables us to understand the potential social, cultural and psychological underpinnings of social identification. It focuses on the motivations underlying our patterns of identification, that is, what the social, cultural and psychological reasons for aligning oneself with a particular group may be.

Iranian Jews and Persian Israelis manifested an attachment to their Iranian/Persian and Israeli/Jewish identities because these identities provided feelings of self-esteem, continuity, distinctiveness and belonging. There was, thus, a social psychological incentive for identifying with them (Vignoles et al., 2002). Although there was some evidence that the two identities posed challenges for coherence, interviewees had clearly developed a more positive relationship with the socially stigmatised group membership (Jewishness in the context of Iran and Iranian-ness in the context of Israel). For instance, the Israelis reported feelings of shame in manifesting their Iranian identity at school but had clearly come to re-evaluate it in more positive terms. Indeed, as Goldstein (1998) has argued, many young Israelis of Iranian heritage have rekindled their relationship with their Iranian identity and derive self-esteem from this group membership. Furthermore, although Iranian Jews manifested a strong attachment to their Iranian-ness, several perceived an attachment to Israel as they construed it as a safe haven for Jews. This can be explained by the perceived lack of safety and security for Jews in the Middle East (Litvak, 2006). Crucially, both Iranian Jews and Persian Israelis viewed their ethnicities as providing a unifying thread between their past and present and, thus, enhanced the continuity principle of identity, which is consistent with social psychological accounts of ethnic identity (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2012).

Yet, Israeli/Jewish and Iranian/Persian identities are socially represented as being in conflict with one another in both the Iranian and Israeli contexts, which can impinge upon perceptions of identity compatibility among individuals themselves and, thus, challenge the coherence principle of identity. In an article published in *Ethnicities*, Jaspal and Cinnirella (2012) explored both sociological and psychological approaches to ethnic diversity within the self, examining concepts of "identity compartmentalization", "hybridity and "new ethnicities", proposing Identity Process Theory as a framework within which they can be collectively examined. When group "identities" are reified in public and political discourses, as they certainly have been in the contexts of Israel and Iran, they become tangible *things* to think about and they become inter-connected in the minds of individuals. Both Zionist-Israeli and Islamist-Iranian discourses have constructed tensions between these identities, which compels individuals at the intersection of these group memberships to take a stance on the coherence of their identities. This is a subjective process - as Jaspal and Cinnirella (2010, p. 866) point out, "psychological coherence is in the eye of the perceiver and not some objective quality of the identities under scrutiny". This is subjective partly because people differ in their level of awareness and acceptance of relevant social representations (Breakwell, 2001).

The two identities may be perceived as irreconcilable and inherently antagonistic in view of the threat representations that underpin contemporary Israeli-Iranian relations – in Israel, Iran is represented as attempting to build a nuclear bomb to annihilate Israel, while in Iran, Israel is constructed as an anomaly in the "Muslim Middle East (Jaspal, 2014b; Klein, 2009). The siege mentality has been described in relation to Israeli society (Bar-Tal, 2000), but it is also observable in predominantly Shia Muslim Iran (Mokhtari, 2005). Individuals may perceive it as implausible for a "loyal" ingroup member to express an attachment to an "enemy state." Moreover, the divide between these identities is reinforced by the existing cultural priority appended to Ashkenazi Jewish Israeli identity in Israel (Ram, 2009) and to Islamo-Persian identity in Iran (Samii, 2000).

Although the problem of identity incompatibility persisted, individuals attempted to cope with potential threats to the principle through the deployment of "coping strategies" (Breakwell, 1986). At a very basic level, individuals attempted to focus upon aspects of their identities perceived to be compatible or reconcilable – for instance, they emphasised similarities between Israeli and Iranian customs and delineated people from politics, especially when the politics of Iranian-Israeli relations were viewed as the source of identity incompatibility. This is consistent with the integration stage of social identity integration model proposed by Amiot and colleagues (2007). Moreover, it is noteworthy that, in the context of Israeli-Iranian relations, social representations have changed radically over time – the two countries went from being friends to foes. Individuals may draw upon positive historical representations in order to deflect the apparent intractability of the intergroup conflict between the two states, thereby attenuating the perception of conflict and rendering the two identities more reconcilable than is usually supposed.

The identity categories themselves evoked particular social representations (see Jaspal et al., 2015 for evidence of this in the context of climate change labels), and individuals may adopt terms or labels for their identities that foster a sense of coherence, rather than incoherence. For instance, Israelis preferred the category "Persian" to "Iranian" due to the more culturally-oriented social representations of the former versus the politically-oriented representations of the latter (see Philogène, 2001 for another example of this categorisation process). Furthermore, interviewees attributed functionality to their identities so that each one was perceived as performing a function and, thus, possessing a purpose. This is analogous to the compartmentalization strategy that has been described in theories of multiple identity construction (Amiot et al., 2007; Roccas & Brewer, 2002). While compartmentalization describes a strict delineation of identity components, which limits contact between them, thereby decreasing scope for threats to identity coherence, our data suggest that individuals attribute a function to each identity and thereby associate it with a distinct dimension of the identity structure. The aim is not to limit contact between the elements but to justify their presence in the identity structure by emphasising the *distinct* functions that they perform for identity.

The Islamic Republic of Iran and the State of Israel may be political foes with distinct worldviews, but within these countries there are people whose identities cut across these *political* boundaries. Iranian Jews and Persian Israelis are aware of the social stigma surrounding their Persian/Iranian and Jewish/Israeli identities, but these identities remain important to them due, at least partly, to the benefits that these identities have for the identity principles of self-esteem, continuity and so on. However, due to the stigma of these identity configurations, individuals may confine their identities to the private domain and eschew any public manifestation of them, which may be aversive for wellbeing (Sedlovskaya et al., 2013). Furthermore, given Iran's legal restrictions on manifesting support for the State of Israel, Iranian Jews understandably worry about their safety. People should be able to identify in ways that are important and meaningful to them, and should not be constrained by state

ideologies that *require* a particular form of identification. After all, identity authenticity is important for social and psychological wellbeing (Vannini & Franzese, 2008). Yet, in deeply assimilationist societies like Israel and Iran, identity authenticity may be severely impeded with negative consequences for wellbeing. Thus, both Iran and Israel should create the social and political contexts in which identities can be assimilated, accommodated and manifested without fear of discrimination. This will require a cultural shift in these countries so that people who identify as Iranian/Persian *and* Israeli/Jewish are not positioned as "outsiders" but rather as insiders within the superordinate Israeli and Iranian ingroups.

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