

A BRIDGE TO IRAN

Activists create a space in which connections between ordinary Israelis and Iranians are allowed to take place
By Joanna Paraszczuk Photos by Tomer Neuberg / Flash 90

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Israel

The top of DJ Sa'id David Rabi's head is just visible behind a dense thicket of microphones and antennas as he introduces a song in his tiny radio studio. As the thumping beats and melancholy crooning of a Persian pop number fill the air, Rabi swings round in his wheelchair, slaps his palm on his knee, and beams in delight.

"That's a great tune. It's a band from Tehrangeles," he enthuses, using the Persian nickname for the large Iranian immigrant community in Los Angeles.

Rabi, or DJ Sa'id Joon as he is affectionately known to Israel's Persian community and to his listeners worldwide ("joon," Persian for soul, is an Iranian term of endearment), is the owner and chief DJ of Radio Asal, Israel's first Persian-language radio station. Wheelchair-bound since being injured on active military service, Rabi started Radio Asal 18 years ago as a hobby. Now he runs daily broadcasts out of a studio in the backyard of his home in Holon, a sprawling city south of Tel Aviv.

Amid the intense political hostilities between Iran and Israel, Persian music has become one way that Persian Jews can not only express and enjoy their roots, but also share their heritage with Iranians inside Iran. Parsipop, which is defined by the Persian language and not religion, has become a "depoliticized" feature of a wider Iranian identity, including Iranian-Jewish identity.

Rabi, who emigrated from Iran to Israel with his family when he was nine, says that when he started Radio Asal in the nineties, no Israeli radio station would play Iranian music, even though Iranian Jews, Rabi says – he uses the word "Parsim," the Hebrew for Persians – were demanding Iranian culture.

"There were just me and the Voice of Israel [Israel's public radio service] broadcasting in Persian," he recalls, his eyes glazing over as he tells The Jerusalem Report about the many times his illicit studio was raided by the police.

These days things have changed, and Radio Asal is a completely legal outfit. The police raids are history, but the popular demand for Iranian music has expanded. Tuning in to Rabi's daily mix of upbeat chatter and Parsipop are listeners from Israel's Iranian Jewish community, Iranian émigrés in Europe and North America, and even Iranians in Iran. "My show appeals to Persians of all ages, from zero to 90," he boasts.

Yet when I ask Rabi if he thinks Radio Asal is a form of outreach or public diplomacy, a way of connecting with Iranians, he shakes his head vehemently. "No, my rule is that we try to stay away from politics. Most people don't care about politics. We're here for fun," he insists.

While Rabi's motivation for Radio Asal is pleasure and pop, not politics, it is undeniable that his broadcasts – in a mixture of Persian, Hebrew and some English – are part of a space in which connections between ordinary

WE WANT IRANIANS TO UNDERSTAND THAT ISRAELIS HAVE THE SAME PROBLEMS THEY DO

Israelis and Iranians are allowed to take place.

While the world's focus is on Jerusalem's suspicions and concerns about Tehran's nuclear program and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's dire warnings that Iran is bent on destroying Israel; or the threats by Iran's military and Revolutionary Guards to attack Tel Aviv and Quds Day rallies against the "Zionist regime," the space opened up by these connections bypasses this dominant theme of implacable enmity between the Jewish State and the Islamic Republic. These conversations are not initiated by politicians and do not occur through diplomatic channels. Rather, they are happening at a popular level.

As far as Radio Asal is concerned, as well as the radio's Iranian audience many of those involved with the station have family connections in Iran, including one of the radio's newest DJs, a recent immigrant from the Islamic Republic.

There are also links with Iranians outside the Islamic Republic: Rabi, the mover and shaker of the Persian community's nightlife scene, has a knack for convincing Iranian diaspora musicians and pop singers – that's Iranian Muslims, not Jews – to come to Israel to perform in his many discos, concerts and parties.

In Israel, most of the impetus to connect with Iranians comes from within the Persian-speaking community. Iranian Jews have retained a strong sense of Iranian identity and of belonging to Iranian culture.

One of those Iranian immigrants is Dr. Soli Shahvar, senior lecturer at the Ezri Center for Iran & Persian Gulf Studies at the University

of Haifa. In order to connect with Iranians, Shahvar, whose family immigrated to Israel before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, has set up a website that publishes news and articles about Israel, translated into Persian for an Iranian audience.

The aim of the project, which is named TehTel from the names Tehran and Tel Aviv, is not to entertain, nor is it a form of public diplomacy. Instead, it aims to present Iranians with a realistic picture of Israel – the good and the bad – to counter the Iranian regime's virulently negative narrative about the Jewish state. As a result of Tehran's propaganda, many Iranians have what Shahvar calls a "twisted view" of Israel.

"We want to neutralize the Islamic Republic's propaganda that says that all Israelis are evil, all Israelis want to gouge out the eyes of the Palestinians and destroy Iran," Shahvar tells The Report.

Echoing Rabi's conviction that people care more about fun than politics, Shahvar says that TehTel also stays away from thorny political debate. Instead, the site focuses on everyday issues to which ordinary people from both countries can relate. "We want Iranians to understand that Israelis have the same problems they do. They have struggles with religion, so do we; they have economic issues, so do we," he explains.

Yoni Shadmi, TehTel's founding editor, explains to The Report that probably as a result of Tehran's relentless negative propaganda, many ordinary Iranians are intensely interested in knowing more about what daily life in Israel is like.

The TehTel website offers readers the opportunity to debate and comment on articles they have read. Those who do comment care more about Israel's internal dynamics, social problems, culture and economics than big political issues like the Palestinians or Syria. "Most people are interested in day-to-day matters. They couldn't care less about the so-called big issues," Shadmi says.

One recent post, discussing military service among Israeli women, opened up a debate about feminism and women in the military, while Iranians were fascinated by another popular post comparing the prices of basic food items in Israel and Iran (Iran is cheaper). Shadmi says that while it is impossible to assess TehTel's overall effect, "something is definitely happening."

Iranians from all over Iran, not just Tehran, are visiting the site and joining in the debates. A recent trend, he says, is for TehTel articles to be copied and republished around the Iranian

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blogosphere and on news sites, including on the ultra-conservative, religious, pro-government website Raja News. While conservative outlets like Raja News take TehTel's content, they also make changes, including replacing "Israel" with the politically-loaded "Zionist regime" (Tehran's name for the Jewish state) and censoring images of women.

Yet far from criticizing the Iranian outlets for such censorship, Shadmi praises them for using the articles in the first place. He believes the Iranian media's willingness to read and copy TehTel articles is a positive sign that they are prepared to be "flexible. The Iranian regime is not completely repressive. It is agile and sophisticated, and more and more it allows things to happen," he adds.

According to Shadmi, even hard-line, pro-regime Iranians use TehTel as a springboard to express various viewpoints about Israel, and to debate and discuss their opinions about the Jewish State. The open discussions lead to a more nuanced view of Israel, even among the pro-regime commenters, he believes.

Comments are not censored, and while some commentators use the freedom to make negative remarks ("With Allah's help, one day the cancerous tumor of Israel will be destroyed!")

one reader wrote under a recent article), others offer different views.

"What difference is there really between Iran and Israel?" one commenter asks in response to an article about 18-year-old Israeli high school students receiving their government-issued identity cards. Apart from the fact that the female students pictured in the article were not wearing headscarves, they looked just like Iranians, the commenter pointed out. It is illegal in Iran to visit Israeli websites, so the fact that Iranians are reading TehTel at all let alone making comments – even negative ones – is a testament to their great interest in finding out about Israel.

Iranian web surfers wishing to visit TehTel must also bypass the filtering software that blocks Israeli and tens of thousands of other international news outlets, opposition movement sites, and sites belonging to human rights groups. Despite the risks they face, Iranian bloggers regularly contact TehTel with offers to contribute articles to the site.

Even so, Shadmi notes that there is an "element of fear" among Iranian bloggers, who have seen their peers arrested and imprisoned for writing content critical of the regime. In November 2012, blogger Sattar

Beheshti died in custody after being arrested by Iran's notorious cyberpolice, on allegations of "actions against national security."

Shadmi says that his team tries not to expose bloggers with whom they are in contact to danger. However, he admits that while he has faith in Iranian bloggers' knowledge of the local security apparatus and of how far they can go, he does have concerns about their safety.

"We are more cautious than the bloggers," he says, recalling a tense moment when police stopped and questioned one blogger as he took photographs of a Tehran park frequented by gay men for a story he was writing. Had the police found out he was snapping the park for an Israeli website, he would have been in serious trouble. However, Shadmi says the blogger brushed off the incident, saying that he could "get stopped by the police anywhere."

THE TEHTEL project has shown that ordinary Iranians are receptive to and keen to make connections with Israel.

Kamal Penhasi, an Iranian immigrant who publishes Israel's only Persian-language newspaper, Shahyad, is also convinced that ordinary Iranians and Israelis hold the key to

Sa'id David Rabi (Sa'id Joon), founder of Persian radio station Radio Asal, plays a Persian pop tune in his studio in the backyard of his Holon home

Penhasi goes further, saying that many Israelis feel not only distrust but also hatred toward Iranians. The problem, he believes, is ignorance. "Israelis don't like Iranians, because they don't know anything about Iran," he says. To help address the problem, Penhasi founded an NGO, the Iran-Israel Organization, which tries to alleviate Israelis' negative feelings about Iranians by teaching them about Persian culture. Events have included Persian book fairs and lectures about Iranian history.

TehTel's Shahvar also believes that Israelis are extremely curious about Iranian culture and life. "Whenever an Iranian movie is screened in Israel, people flock to see it," he says.

Shahvar's team at the University of Haifa has plans to develop the TehTel project so that alongside its Persian site about Israel, it will also offer a Hebrew site with blog posts and articles about Iran, to provide Israelis with insights into everyday life in the Islamic Republic.

Shahvar, who describes himself as a "bridge between the two cultures," also organizes Iranian cultural evenings at the University of Haifa, to give Israelis a chance to experience positive aspects of Iran. In March, the university will throw a party for Nowruz, the traditional Iranian New Year celebrations that are rooted in Iran's pre-Islamic Zoroastrian past.

"This is the true Iranian culture," Shahvar says. "Not the culture of death that the regime preaches."

As Shahvar and Penhasi each plan more ways to increase understanding between ordinary Iranians and Israelis, from the radio come the sounds of Israeli-born Persian pop singer Hezi Fanian singing his recent Parsipop hit "Hagheh Ma" (Our Rights), his message of hope to the Iranian people:

Soon our days will be spring,
And our winters will end,
The wicked will disappear,
and better days will come

Instead of nuclear weapons,
We have the rights to many things,
Rights to sing,
Rights to wear whatever we want...

increasing understanding between the two countries. "The problem is with the Iranian regime, not the Iranian people. The regime preaches animosity, but most Iranians don't hate us," he tells The Report. A staunch monarchist, whose family came to Israel in 1979, shortly after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini declared an Islamic Republic, Penhasi's cultural heritage and political views are – quite literally – written on the walls of his print store in Holon.

Pinned to one wall is a large photograph of former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, his grinning face seamlessly Photoshopped onto the head and body of a chimpanzee. Opposite, gazing with benevolent condescension at Ahmadinejad, is a framed picture of the deposed Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, ruler of the former Imperial State of Iran. As he points out the latter picture, Penhasi says the shah's son, the last crown prince Reza Pahlavi, would make a good ruler of a post-Islamic Iran. "But only if the people wanted him," he insists.

Though his political views are somewhat different, Penhasi shares the basic belief of TehTel's Shadmi and Shahvar that it is up to Israelis, and particularly the Persian Jewish

community, to build bridges to ordinary Iranians and offer them information about their country. "We need to tell Iranians that we don't want war with them," he says.

WHILE PROJECTS like TehTel are making strides towards improving Iranians' views on and knowledge of Israel, what is being done to reduce Israelis' fears and mistrust of Iranians?

TehTel's Shahvar says that Israeli attitudes toward Iranians are generally better than Iranian attitudes toward Israelis, mostly because the Israeli government is careful to criticize the Islamic Republic and not its people. However, he admits that there is still a great deal of mistrust toward Iranians, who are more often than not seen as "the enemy."

That mistrust is evident from the reactions of Israelis and the Jewish community to mentions of Iran. Radio Asal's Rabi recalls the extreme reactions he got from listeners after he wished a friendly mazel tov to the Iranian soccer team during his radio program.

"It was crazy. We got a huge flood of calls from all over the world. People were yelling at me, saying, 'How can you wish them mazel tov, they're our enemies?'" he says with an amused shrug.