



## German Jewish Physicians in Iran During Reza Shah Era: A Documentary Examination of Migration and Employment

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### Extended Abstract

The era of Reza Shah Pahlavi's reign in Iran (1925-1941) was defined by an ambitious, state-led modernization campaign aimed at transforming the nation's social, economic, and institutional fabric. A central pillar of this autocratic project was the development of a modern public health infrastructure, a domain severely hampered by a chronic shortage of specialized medical personnel and advanced facilities. This domestic deficiency necessitated a strategic reliance on foreign expertise to staff newly established hospitals, such as the planned 500-bed facility in Tehran, and to elevate the standards of academic institutions like Tehran University's Faculty of Medicine. Coincidentally, the political rise of the Nazi Party in Germany in 1933 precipitated a profound humanitarian crisis and an unprecedented intellectual exodus. The swift implementation of antisemitic laws led to the systematic dismissal of Jewish professionals from public and academic posts, creating a displaced diaspora of highly skilled German physicians who, facing persecution, desperately sought refuge and opportunities to continue their professional lives abroad. This confluence of Iran's pressing need for medical experts and the availability of a distinguished, displaced cohort of German Jewish doctors created a unique, time-sensitive historical opportunity for the Iranian state.

This study, grounded in a descriptive-analytical methodology, delves into the Iranian government's complex and often contradictory response to this influx of talent. Its empirical foundation rests upon a rich repository of previously unexamined archival documents from the National Library and Archives of Iran (NLAI). Through a meticulous analysis of official correspondence between key government ministries, diplomatic communiqués from Iranian legations in Europe, and personal petitions submitted by the physicians, the research reconstructs a multi-layered narrative of this phenomenon. These primary sources reveal a fundamentally dualistic policy. On one hand, the government, driven by its modernization agenda, actively sought to attract these professionals. Official reports from Iranian envoys in Europe explicitly recommended capitalizing on Germany's policies by recruiting these skilled doctors. The potential benefits were clear: their presence was seen as a catalyst for elevating



medical practice, transferring critical knowledge to Iranian students, and incentivizing local doctors to serve in underserved provinces. Furthermore, the émigré physicians often presented financially attractive proposals, agreeing to work for modest salaries and, in some documented cases, offering to import their own state-of-the-art medical equipment at personal expense, a significant incentive for a government navigating severe foreign currency constraints.

Nonetheless, the potential for successfully integrating these practitioners was significantly undermined by a formidable array of structural, political, and bureaucratic impediments. The Pahlavi administrative apparatus proved slow, inefficient, and poorly coordinated. The archival records reveal this dysfunction through a circular chain of correspondence between ministries, where responsibility was deferred and decisions endlessly postponed. The process was so convoluted that it prompted interventions from high-level officials, who lamented the lack of a clear directive, highlighting the bureaucratic paralysis. This administrative chaos was further exacerbated by restrictive legal measures. The government enacted protectionist legislation mandating that foreign doctors demonstrate proficiency in either Persian or French and navigate a cumbersome, lengthy credentialing process. While ostensibly aimed at quality control, these regulations functioned as a major deterrent for many highly qualified candidates.

Beyond these administrative hurdles lay deep-seated political apprehensions. The Reza Shah regime harbored a fundamental suspicion of foreign nationals, particularly Jews. Internal government memos express anxiety about the potential for espionage, socio-political influence, and the flight of capital should the Jewish émigrés decide to leave. This underlying xenophobia was compounded by delicate diplomatic considerations. During the 1930s, Iran was actively cultivating stronger economic and political ties with Nazi Germany, a key partner in its industrialization projects. Consequently, the government was wary of any action that could be construed as a public rebuke to the Third Reich, such as the conspicuous mass employment of its Jewish refugees. This forced the Iranian government into a precarious balancing act, attempting to discreetly recruit talent without antagonizing a powerful ally.

The result of this interplay was a dynamic in which the strategic imperative for modernization clashed with the realities of a dysfunctional bureaucracy and political paranoia. While a number of distinguished German Jewish physicians were successfully employed and made lasting contributions to Iranian medicine, the state's ambivalent and inefficient handling of the situation meant that a far greater number of applicants were either rejected due to red tape or left the country after brief, unsuccessful tenures. This prevented the realization of the full potential of this historic moment. In its final analysis, this study concludes that Iran ultimately failed to fully capitalize on a golden opportunity to rapidly advance its healthcare system. The story of the German Jewish physicians in Iran is therefore a compelling case study of the inherent tensions within Reza Shah's modernization project, where the grand ambition to build a modern state was consistently constrained by the very institutional and political structures it sought to reform.

**Keywords:** German Jewish Physicians, Reza Shah, Medical Infrastructure, Nazism, the Modernization.



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