

This paper provides an alternative account of political life for Jews in Iran through a critical reading of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, a French-Jewish philanthropic organization aimed at “civilizing” the Jews of the Orient. The Alliance itself and historians of Iran posit that Iranian Jews were not politically active during the Constitutional period because of their non-participation in the Constitutional Revolution. But the archives of the Alliance expose the political instabilities that render the Constitutional Revolution an inappropriate litmus test for Jewish political activism. The success of the Ottoman Empire’s constitutional revolution in 1908 led the Alliance to believe that the Iranian Constitutional Revolution could similarly fulfill the organization’s “civilizing mission.” Yet given the failures of the revolution, the Alliance itself would become the site of Jewish political life in Iran, and Alliance Jews—both indigenous and European—became part of the political fabric of Iran.

In sum, this paper is about paradox. It is a story about how the very goals of the Alliance—its civilizing mission—constituted both Iranian Jewish political life and the omission of that life during the years of Iran’s nation formation.