

*This article by Krikor Markarian was originally published in Mission Frontiers, September 01, 2008. It provides historical insights into God's astounding work we see in Iran today.*

## Today's Iranian Revolution How the Mullahs are Leading the Nation to Jesus

“The only way were going to stop them is to kill them.” This seems to be the present consensus of Iran's national cabinet concerning the growing Christ-ward movement spreading throughout the nation. Legislation is now being prepared that would make it a capital offense to leave Islam. These strict measures have come about to stem the tide of a growing dissatisfaction with Islam among Persian young people resulting from the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Now today, it seems Iran is on the verge of yet another revolution, ironically caused by the first and with Jesus at the center. The story of how this has come about is perhaps one of the most intriguing examples of God's sovereignty at work to accomplish his unchanging purposes among the nations.

### A Little Background

In the early 1960s, just two decades before Iran would become completely closed to mission work, a team of American missionaries began a work among the Persian Armenian community in Tehran. Most of these Armenians were the descendants of a forced exile to Iran in 1604 under the Shah Abbas. Over the centuries they developed a unique culture, dialect, and appearance (don't ask) as they assimilated with their host nation. The missionaries recognized the potential for these Persian Armenians to serve as a “bridge-people” between Islam and Christianity, and so began work among them with this in mind.

This Spirit-led hunch turned out to be correct. One of the first five disciples of the American missionary team was a man named Haik Hovsepian. In the late 1960s he received a call from God to go as a missionary to the northern province of Mazandaran with the specific purpose of starting a work among Muslims. Though he was officially commissioned by the church in Tehran for this purpose, his burden for Muslims was one that few Persian Armenians shared or understood at that time. Most believed he was wasting his time. However, by 1976, after about eight years of laboring, five house churches had been established with around 20 Muslim-background believers. Though only a small beginning, somehow Haik had a sense that God was building a foundation for a much greater work. Having a gift for music, one of the most important investments he made in the future Persian Church was his translation and authorship of over 150 worship songs into Farsi. According to those who knew him, he envisioned the day such songs would be sung by millions of believers.

By 1981, the Persian church in Mazandaran had grown to around 60 members, and many leaders were emerging. In that year, Haik was asked to return to Tehran to become the leader of the Council of Protestant Ministers (a group that is roughly the equivalent of the National Association of Evangelicals in the United States). His appointment to this post was very timely for the church in Iran. Just two years after the Iranian government was seized by the Ayatollah Khomeini, (an influential Muslim cleric with a vision for Islamicizing the country), the emerging church in Iran was beginning to feel the pressure of an increasingly hostile government.

However, at the same time, the church in Iran was not the only group to chafe under the

new regime. The Persian people themselves were beginning to react in a negative way to the harsh restrictions imposed by the implementation of Islamic law. A silent rebellion among young people (70% of Iran is under the age of 30) was beginning to build momentum. Among this age group, if the government opposed something, they were for it. When the government burned American flags, they wrapped themselves in it. Most importantly, when the government began confiscating Bibles, they couldn't wait to get hold of one.

Slowly but surely, a kind of solidarity was beginning to build between the persecuted Armenian believers and the "persecuted" youth of Iran. In defiance of the law, Haik began to encourage the Armenian Evangelical churches to open their doors to Persians and to begin using the Farsi language in their services. As new Persian believers began pouring into the churches, the government issued an ultimatum demanding that all such believers be reported. In response, Haik courageously rallied the churches to send a unified response back to the government: We will never submit to such demands.

### **Breakthrough**

By the late 1980s, the number of Persian Muslim-background believers had grown into many thousands. Then in the 1990s, two things converged to turn this momentum into one of the greatest watershed events in the history of Persian Christianity. The first was a wave of government-organized crackdowns and assassinations of Christian leaders (including Haik Hovsepian in 1994, whose campaign to stop the execution of a Persian convert received both national and international attention). The result of this was that hundreds of Persian lay-leaders rose up to take the place of these martyrs and a nationwide house-church movement was born. Indeed, the boldness of Haik and the other martyrs, both Armenian and Persian, had a profound effect on the Evangelical church, but most especially upon the Persian believers themselves. At Haik's funeral, hundreds of Persian MBBs turned out to honor him despite the presence of government agents documenting all who were present.

All of this was God's foundation-building for what would come next. In the year 2000, Christian satellite broadcasting began beaming the gospel to almost every home in Iran. This was made possible by the fact that millions of satellite dishes had been illegally smuggled into Iran by corrupt members of the same government that had outlawed them. The Christian satellite programs became a lifeline for the church in Iran. Much more, when the Iranian people learned that the government was trying to scramble the broadcasts, they became an overnight sensation. Recent nationwide surveys reveal that over 70% of the population is watching Christian satellite programs. These same surveys indicate that at least one million have already become believers, and many millions more are on the verge.

This growth has happened so fast, the underground church can hardly keep apace. In one example, a house church that began with two people several years ago has now multiplied into over twenty groups. The leader of this network remarked, "Starting churches in Iran is easy! Everywhere you go to evangelize, people are ready to receive the gospel, or they have already become believers through satellite broadcasts." Training leaders is also easy, remarks another leader. The government has left young people with nothing to do. So believers spend time with one another everyday. They are constantly gathering for prayer, Bible study and evangelism. When a group reaches 25 people, they divide in half and begin again. Within two years, a new believer is expected to become a leader of a new house-fellowship and a discipler of new leaders.

There are now so many believers in Iran, the satellite broadcasters have begun shifting gears towards more discipleship-oriented programming. The son of Haik Hovsepian, Gilbert, has continued his father's legacy by producing a series of "live-worship" broadcasts, as well as a CD and hymnal collection of over 500 songs for the underground church. He also broadcasts a weekly Bible teaching program that has been viewed by

church. He also broadcasts a weekly Bible teaching program that has been viewed by 40% of the population and is one of the top ten watched programs in the country. As in China, the rapid multiplication of house-churches through the “cell-division” strategy has resulted in well-organized networks. Among those that derive from Haik’s Makhaz church in Tehran, there are at least 1,000 groups, most of which are the fruit of Haik’s intentional discipleship of several dozen core Persian leaders in the late eighties and early nineties. One of these leaders, for example, oversees 137 house-church fellowships. However, these networks, while a strength on the one hand, can be a weakness on the other. Recently, in early 2008, a network of around 50 churches was infiltrated by government intelligence agents that responded to satellite broadcasts as would-be seekers. From there they were able to work their way into an entire network. The believers associated with these groups were rounded up and forced to sign a document that outlined their punishment if ever they assembled again. Due to such heightening security concerns, coordination between the underground church and satellite broadcasting ministries is growing increasingly difficult, though creative solutions are being sought to bridge this divide.

Leaders of house-church networks have repeatedly expressed that one of their greatest needs is for more Bibles in Farsi. The stories of how God has used the Scriptures to bring entire families to Christ continue to pour forth from Iran. There is a tremendous hunger and widespread demand for the Bible. A new translation coordinated by Elam Ministries (one of the larger agencies serving the Persian church and founded by a Persian Armenian) has already had a profound impact. An audio version is now being prepared by Gilbert Hovsepian and will be completed within the year. It has been said that even if 10 million Bibles were available today in Iran, they would not be enough. One lady, who has personally distributed 20,000 Bibles, says never once did anyone turn her down. Rather, the vast majority received it as the greatest treasure they had ever been given.

## Rebirth of the Persian Church

In the last ten years a new term has become widespread throughout Iran, which can be literally translated “Persian-Christian,” or as they would conceptually translate it “Muslim-Christian” (Farsi-Masihi). For centuries, it was assumed that if you were a Christian, you were Armenian. If someone saw you wearing a cross they might ask, “Are you Armenian?” or “Have you become Armenian?” But today the question has changed. This new identity is highly significant, testifying to the presence of a truly indigenous, self-reproducing movement. It has long been believed that a breakthrough among Persians could have significant impact on surrounding peoples in Central Asia and the Middle East. This has certainly proved to be the case in Iran itself. Persian missionaries are now being sent to nearby minority peoples, such as the Azeri, Luri and Kurds, with funding coming directly from the Persian believers themselves.

Though all of this is cause for rejoicing, it is important to remember that the Persian church has been here before. In fact, it was a cross-cultural missionary from Persia, Gregory the Illuminator, who was instrumental in Armenia becoming one of the first Christian nations. Gregory was the fruit of a growing spiritual awakening among Persian peoples that was occurring in the late third century. Up until this time, most believers in the Persian Empire were of Jewish or Assyrian descent. But around the time that Armenia embraced Christianity, a powerful move of the Holy Spirit could be seen across the border among native Persians as well. Unfortunately, this breakthrough would be short-lived.

In 312 AD the Roman general Constantine was led to believe he should conquer in the name of the cross. His conversion to Christianity and subsequent rise to power as the emperor of a united Rome, suddenly brought a political dimension to the new faith. From then on, Christians in the Persian Empire were seen as a potential “fifth column” and a new wave of government-organized persecution began. By the end of the 4th century,

hundreds of thousands would be martyred. Finally with the coming of Islam in the 7th century, the fledgling Persian church gradually declined and then disappeared. Interestingly, the only churches in Asia and North Africa that survived Islamic occupation were those that had the Scriptures in their language. The Armenian, Syrian and Coptic churches are some examples. However, among the Persians, Berbers, and Arabs, no Bible was available in their mother tongue. That mistake would only be rectified in modern times, and it is likely no coincidence that with the presence of the Bible in these lands, the Church has begun to grow once again.

Among the Persians, that rebirth has been truly dramatic, and may eventually change the course of Iran's history. Although presently this new movement is entering into a new period of trial, this time around they have a strong international network of believers, churches and ministries standing ready to help them. Now they have the Scriptures in Farsi, contextualized worship songs, leadership training programs, and satellite broadcasts. And last but not least, they have the promise of Jesus, who said, "I will build my church . . ." Without any doubt, the move of the Holy Spirit in Iran is evidence of that ultimate and enduring reality.

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