



Today's Iranian Revolution:

How the Mullahs Are Leading the Nation to Jesus

Krikor Markarian

“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

Now today, it seems Iran is on the verge of yet another revolution, ironically caused by the first and with Jesus at the center.

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

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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

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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

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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 nation-wide 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.

Do Iranians Really Hate America?

Krikor Markarian

“Marg bar Amrika! Marg bar Amrika!” Death to America! has been the rallying cry of Iran's Islamic Revolution since its earliest days. Images of Persian crowds chanting the regime's favorite slogan have made a permanent impression on American minds.

Though this may be puzzling to some, it's not hard to see why they might hate us. Our government orchestrated a successful coup in Iran to control the nation's oil in 1953, the very act which led to the Islamic Revolution in 1979. A few years later we were aiding Saddam in the Iran-Iraq war. Even today there are still thousands suffering from chronic illness resulting from the use of chemical and biological weapons against Iran, adding to the hundreds of thousands who lost their lives. But ironically, today's Iranian young people have either forgotten about this or chosen to disregard it. For most, hatred of their own government is all-consuming, and anyone who hates the current regime as much as they do must be an ally. And so yet another paradox presents itself in this land of bountiful contradictions: Iranian young people actually love the United States of America.

This strange phenomenon has not gone without international notice, and the Islamic regime is struggling to know what to do about it. *Time* magazine reports in an article entitled, “How the Great Satan Became Just Great,”

“While elsewhere in the Middle East consumers are boycotting American goods to protest U.S. foreign policy, Iranians can't get enough of them. Coca-Cola's exports to Iran have increased nearly threefold this year. Toy stores are struggling to keep up with the growing demand for Barbie dolls.”

The government's response to this was typical: they issued a doll series of their own—Sara and Dara, clad in good Muslim garb. But the public would have nothing to do with the proselyte Barbies.

The government has warned that American dolls and toys, which are being illegally smuggled into the country in mass quantities, are doing “irreparable damage” to Iranian children. Such dire warnings seem to only fan the flame. If the government says its bad, it must be good. The Mullahs have become the best marketing campaign for American products and culture there has ever been. And what the public can't smuggle in, they manufacture. Ever

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.



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entrepreneurial, Persians have begun tapping into their Western obsession by counterfeiting everything American—from franchise restaurants (Carl's Jr. and KFC), to clothing lines (Victoria's Secret), to food products (Baskin Robin's Peanut-butter Chocolate Ice-Cream). The moment you slap an American brand label on something, it becomes an overnight sensation.



Although American readers may chuckle over this demand for our iconic brands, it is actually rather strange when you think about it. Anti-Americanism is on the rise all over the Middle East and the Muslim world with one exception. If you had to guess the exception, Iran would probably be the last country to come to mind. But there it is, an island of goodwill towards the Great Satan in a vast sea of anger and frustration. What we choose to do with it could be very significant, though we should keep in mind that good-will in the Middle East is a very tenuous affair. If our government decides to disable nuclear facilities in the country, Iran experts predict this goodwill could vanish

overnight. One young Iranian put it this way to an American journalist, "As much as I hate this regime, I love my country more. If America were to attack Iran, I would be the first to lay down my life. Ask anyone and they will tell you the same." Another reporter was told, "If even one U.S. soldier comes to Iran all of this [love of America] will end." We would do well to remind ourselves that we are dealing with a worldview far different from our own. What

seem like paradoxes and contradictions to us make perfect sense to them.

The Mullahs are praying for a miracle, and perhaps the West will send them one in the form of bunker busters, stamped "Made in America." It would be the ultimate irony. Indeed the verdict is still out on which way the pendulum will swing. But at the end of the day, our most powerful weapons seem to be cultural and material. Hollywood, MTV, and Victoria's Secret are proving much more potent satellite-guided missiles than anything the Navy or the Marines possess. So choose your poison. It's no wonder the Mullahs think we're in league with the Devil. f

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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 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.

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Spiritual Vacuum

Krikor Markarian

Officially, there are 1.1 million drug addicts in the nation of Iran. It is in fact illegal to say there are more. But in a recent international conference on addiction, a spokesperson for Iran's Interior Ministry publicly admitted the number is more like 10 million, or around 1 in 7 Iranians. With a cheap and plentiful supply of narcotics from across the border in Afghanistan (responsible for 93% of the world's opium), the disillusioned youth in Iran have proved a fertile breeding ground for a massive epidemic. Though possessing and using narcotics is illegal, the dangers posed by the rapid spread of the AIDS virus have forced the government to launch an emergency campaign to distribute free needles throughout the country. At the same time, billions are being spent to construct a massive wall between the Iranian and Afghan border which is 13 feet high and 16 feet wide.



The wall has become somewhat symbolic of Iran's futile attempts to protect its citizens from outside influence. No matter what they do, they only succeed in increasing the demand for whatever it is they have most recently outlawed. One begins to get the feeling that a majority of the social problems in Iran are actually silent protests against the government's oppressive restrictions of personal freedom. While Iran's young people may not be allowed to march in the streets, they have found other ways to voice their discontent with the current regime, which are far more difficult to control.

Point of No Return

Following the 1979 revolution, the Mullahs established a shadow government called the Guardian Council which essentially ran the country. In every way, this was the revolution: religion and the state were now in sync. But what

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” (*farsimasibi*). 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.

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the Mullahs seemed unprepared for was the fallout that would follow from such an alliance. When the state failed to deliver on its promises, it reflected on Islam as well. And over time, the inconsistent behavior of public officials left the Islamic regime with little moral credibility. (A case in point was the arrest last March of Tehran’s police chief, who had led a yearlong crusade against “immodestly” dressed women. He was caught with six prostitutes in a raid on a brothel. However, in the end he received a slap on the wrist. He was released from prison in June and dismissed from his post.)

But long before any government scandals ever surfaced, the seeds of discontentment were being planted for many Iranians right from the start. Many trace their disillusionment with Islam to the very first year of the Revolution, when the Iran-Iraq war began. The conflict soon became the Iranian equivalent of America’s Vietnam quagmire, only with serious religious overtones. Little children were enlisted to clear minefields with nothing more than their own bodies, and were then declared to be martyrs for Islam when blown to pieces. Saddam’s use of chemical weapons against border towns revealed the cruelty and brutality of what became *Jihad vs. Jihad*. Yet there was nothing sacred about it. It was just Muslims killing Muslims, and clerics

on both sides condemning the other and providing justification for the mass-slaughter of innocent civilians.

With casualties of over a million persons in Iran, the rapid social decay which followed became something the government desperately needed to keep under wraps. Iran was supposed to become a model for the entire Muslim world of what an Islamic society should look like. The Mullahs promised health, wealth and prosperity, but all that followed was war, unemployment, and widespread corruption. And in the end, the greatest irony of it all was that the Revolution produced the very thing it set out to stop: the complete secularization of the hearts and minds of the Iranian people.



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.

Interestingly, the only churches in Asia and North Africa that survived Islamic occupation were those that had the Scriptures in their language.

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

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Spiritual Vacuum (cont.)

Iran's Unique Dilemma

Far from achieving their ideals, some would argue the Mullahs have done the Muslim world a favor by disproving the feasibility of their own political theories. But in a honor/shame culture like you find in Iran, nothing could be more painful than to experience the embarrassment of an entire population spinning out of control while its leaders stand by helpless, and seemingly heartless. Indeed, one can't help but feel the desperate frustration of the government coming through with every new piece of increasingly despotic legislation.

But adding to the embarrassment and frustration of the regime is the fact that the Islamic Revolution *has* to work. They have no choice but to make it work—the entire Sunni Muslim world is watching this Shia experiment. The violent split between Shiites and Sunnis in the 7th century occurred over the very issue that fed Iran's Islamic Revolution over a millennium later. The Shiites favor clergy-run governments, and the Sunnis oppose it. So what is at stake here is the very



legitimacy of the Shiite tradition. This explains why disillusionment with the government in Iran can only lead to disillusionment with Islam itself. It's all rolled together into one package, and no other alternatives are possible.

The sense that there is no way out of this has only added to the despair and hopelessness of what is fast becoming a lost generation—an age group which represents 70% of the country. Today, young people commonly ask their parents the same question: How could you let this happen? Why did you support something so dark and terrible as the Islamic revolution? Being unfamiliar with what led to the current reign of the Mullahs and only familiar with the strict measures it has imposed on their lives, this bizarre event simply makes no sense to anyone under 30. Why would anyone choose this? To an entire generation there can only be one answer: Surely our parents must not have known what they were getting themselves into. The Mullahs deceived them, and now we have to pay for it.



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. f

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With no other Islamic or religious options permissible, an entire generation of young people has little choice but secularization, and thanks to Afghanistan, a hopelessness made a little easier with a heavy dose of sedation. In fact, some Iran watchers believe law enforcers secretly support the narcotics trade and control it as a win-win scenario: officials get to pack their slush funds, and the young, would-be revolutionaries are too stoned to care.

Desperate Times

The virtual secularization of the country has created a vast spiritual vacuum which something has to fill. Presently there are two major options: drugs or Jesus. The government can't seem to make up its mind which one is worse, though if current proposed legislation is passed, possessing Jesus as a Persian will become an automatic capital offense. In the past, judges had flexibility in dealing with converts to Christianity, but the new law would make execution the mandatory sentence.

The government has also stepped up their efforts to crackdown on secret Christian gatherings. But this is nothing new for Iran's young people. For decades they have become very creative in staying one step ahead of the police. You might even say Iran's secret youth parties were preparation for the birth

of the underground church, because they are organized in much the same way. There is the intermediate meeting place where several

groups come together separate from one another to check everybody out. Then there are the scouts that guide people to the meeting place. Once inside, the head-coverings come off and the dancing gets started. The only real difference is the dancing is to Jesus, and no drinks or drugs are being passed around, just the Holy Spirit.

For the Iranian government these are the worst of times. It was tough enough to bring a generation of disillusioned youth into submission, but now with Jesus thrown into the mix, it's an even tougher sell. How do you take away from a million new Persian believers something which has given them a reason for living? That's the sort of thing people will die for, and every arrest only adds another martyr to the roster. f

