

A Martyr's Cry

Iranian pastor Haik Hovsepien was murdered in 1994, but his voice is still heard—thanks to a fascinating documentary about his courage.

In 1994, Haik Hovsepien, the leader of the Protestant churches in Iran, rose to the defense of a man sentenced to die for converting from Islam to Christianity. Leading an international protest, Hovsepien campaigned successfully for the condemned Christian's release.

But three days later, Hovsepien himself disappeared. His body was soon found riddled with knife wounds. Two other prominent Iranian Christians were martyred six months later, leaving the church stunned and grieving. Hovsepien left behind a wife and four children.

Today, half a world away in Burbank, California, two of Hovsepien's sons, now professional television producers, have created a gripping documentary about their father's life and death. Using real footage from inside Iran, the documentary depicts life under one of the world's most Christ-hostile regimes and issues a call to action to the American church for support and prayer.

"We thought this would be a very powerful story," says Joseph Hovsepien, 34, Haik's eldest son and producer and director of *A Cry From Iran*. "At the time, my view was very personal. I saw it as something that would please our family and families of martyrs and the Iranian church.

"But later, after living in America and seeing Christians who didn't care or know about the persecuted church, we saw another need—to inform Westerners [about the persecution in Iran] so they could start supporting the church there with the power of prayer and in every way."

At the Hovsepien home, photos of Haik's smiling face are placed throughout the house, including above the video-editing suite where Joseph and brother Andre, 24, make a living. It was Haik who had encouraged Joseph to develop his talent for video production back in Iran.

"Against the Islamic laws of the time, the Assemblies of God was very open to music and technology," Joseph says. "My father was a big supporter of technology. He believed you could use it to the glory of God."

Haik probably didn't realize that the footage his teenage son was taking of underground church services, conferences, even funerals for martyred believers would one day be used to tell his own story and the story of other Christians killed during the wave of persecution in the mid-1990s. "I believe it was the work of the Holy Spirit preparing us for such a day to tell such a story," Joseph says.

After Haik's murder, the grief-stricken sons were initially overcome with hatred toward those who had killed their father. "We had a hard time even dealing with Muslims and looking in the mullahs' faces on the streets," Joseph says. "But as the Lord started healing our hearts and bringing forgiveness, filling us up with more peace and care for the enemy and for the country of Iran, then [we decided to stay] for the sake of encouraging the church and other martyrs—soon there were several of them."

Iran is experiencing one of the greatest revivals of modern times—due to supernatural phenomena such as dreams and visions.

Joseph began to contemplate making a documentary about his father, and as the media director for the Assemblies of God in Iran, he honed his skills with a Super-8 camera and an editing machine. A family friend paid Joseph's way to study filmmaking and Bible in the U.K.

Before the Hovsepien family moved together to the U.S. in

1999, they traveled to a European country and then claimed refugee status there. Their suitcases were crammed full of home-video tapes that one day would provide the raw footage for A Cry From Iran. "We had this hope that somehow we would still be passionate and beneficial for the church of Iran [after we moved to the U.S.]," Andre says.

In Southern California they discovered that the Iranian Christian community was already reaching back to Iran via satellite TV and the Internet. The brothers began producing and hosting programs for Farsi-language television. They became part of a technological revolution that in the last seven years has utterly transformed the way Christians live in Iran.

Emerging From Silence

Until recently, the church in Iran was isolated from the global Christian community. "We went through 10 years of not feeling in touch with the church in Iran except when people came in and out," says one longtime missionary to Iran who, like many others Charisma interviewed, asked not to be identified for fear of reprisal.

When Iranian Christians dared to contact believers outside the country, they used false return addresses, moved fax machines house to house and spoke by phone in Armenian and Syrian rather than Farsi to make it harder for the government to monitor them.

But according to many with firsthand knowledge, Iran is now experiencing one of the great revivals of modern times due to supernatural phenomena such as dreams and visions, and to satellite television and the Internet, which now connect Iranian believers instantly—and, for the most part, safely—to Christians around the world. The church in Iran has grown from a few thousand people in the mid-1990s to several hundred thousand people today.

"Iran remains one of the worst places in the world for a Christian to live out their faith, preceded only by North Korea and Saudi Arabia," says Carl Moeller, president and chief executive officer of Open Doors USA.

"The abuse of Christians, literally, in the justice system is legendary. Christians do not have the same rights as the other Islamic citizens. They are routinely discriminated against, restricted, and in many cases when they seek to evangelize and disciple, church leaders are arrested, interrogated, tortured and even killed for their faith in Jesus Christ.

"However, the church there is growing incredibly. In Iran there is a revival that maybe is only rivaled by the Chinese revival [of recent years]. Honest, seeking Muslims are having dreams of Jesus Christ.

"Some are being approached by what we can only call angels in parks and being confronted with their personal sins and told they need to come to Jesus Christ. It's a revival the likes of which we've rarely seen in the history of the church. It's been Holy Spirit-driven through dreams and visions and the technology available to us in the 21st century."

Another longtime missionary to Iran says that "the rate of growth of Christianity in Iran is unprecedented for a Muslim country, especially for Iran. We'll hear that in a certain city there are [dozens of] house churches, whereas there were none before."

An Iranian exile who now produces programs for satellite television says: "For the past three years, [we have seen] the answer to all our prayers for the past 14 years with what's happening now through the satellite dishes, the house-church movements, the masses coming to Christ. You still see stats that Christians are less than 1 percent of Iran's population, but I don't believe that statistic anymore. I think it's much more than that."

“It’s normal for Jesus to come to people in their dreams to heal them or witness to them.” –Iranian missionary

An underground missionary who works with International Antioch Ministries says the number of people attending his house churches in Iran doubles every six months. Attendance is fueled in part by dreams and healings. “It’s a normal phenomenon that Jesus comes to people in their dreams and witnesses to them or heals them,” he says.

A longtime Presbyterian missionary to Iran agrees, saying that after the Islamic Revolution in 1979, “some would say something happened spiritually in the heavenlies. From that time on, Iranians began to have more dreams of Christ.

“They would come to church because they had a dream. Some of them were seeing healings. This awakened their interest in the gospel.”

That interest is being met with an unprecedented availability of Christian programming and online discipleship material. Tat Stewart is chairman of Sat-7 PARS, a 24-hour satellite channel to Farsi-speaking nations such as Iran and Afghanistan. In the last seven years satellite TV aimed at Iran has exploded, he says.

There are now at least three round-the-clock Christian stations producing content in Farsi and reaching untold millions. Sat-7 PARS receives hundreds of e-mail messages and telephone calls from eager Iranian viewers each month. They request Bibles and further teaching.

Many Farsi-language Christian programs are aimed at edifying Iran’s house churches. One program, which airs on secular stations in Iran, teaches people how to hold church services in their homes. Another hosts a panel of Iranian-American pastors who answer questions submitted by Christians in Iran, ranging from what to do when a member is arrested to how to find other Christian young people for their children to marry.

Other programs offer Farsi praise music, verse-by-verse exposition of the Gospels, theological teaching and youth-oriented content.

The result is that “people are converting by the masses,” says one Iranian-American television producer. “We know from the e-mails we receive, the phone calls and faxes that it’s a great move of God among Iranians. In the face of persecution and danger, the house church is growing like crazy.

“Last year was amazing. There are so many now. We go onto the Internet for a conference, and people come online from places I’ve never heard of. They give testimonies about how they converted to Christianity and started working on their families.”

Some Iranian pastors in the U.S. have begun holding regular live Internet conferences and Bible studies with Christians in Iran. One pastor listened recently as a home group in Iran sang a worship song to him over the Internet.

“You could hear the kids and women. It brings tears to your eyes,” he says. “These people are persecuted, poor. It’s a danger if someone hears their voices. We teach them to sing really low and clap with two fingers.”

The revival comes as many Iranians seem to have grown disillusioned with Islam and with their current government. “It’s not the Iran of five or six years ago,” says one Iranian-American television host. “People are more secular. Our challenge for the past three years wasn’t Islam but meditation and all this New Age mentality people are being attracted to at this moment.

“Most of the people who listen to our program don’t consider themselves Muslims. They are a mix of Hinduism, New Age and Islam.

“I’m not competing with Islam but with confusion. ‘Who’s

right? Who's wrong?' That creates a freedom for me to talk to them as freely as I want to about the person of God in Christ."

Another missionary says: "There's a huge task ahead of us to feed this movement with solid teaching and balanced views. As we incarnate Christ into the Muslim world, they become very attracted to Christ. He's everything they're longing for and have never experienced in their religion.

"The love of God is a concept they don't know; forgiveness they don't know; assurance of salvation they don't know. When they see up close that Christians have a personal relationship with God, it's very attractive to them."

Another underground missionary says street evangelism is highly effective. "We go to a city that has no believers. We prayer-walk the city for a couple of days, fast, then start witnessing to people [in parks and stores]," he says.

"Iranians have such a desire to get closer to God. They went through Islam and found that God isn't at the end of the trail. [But] when you speak about Christ as a living God, people get saved right there.

"You just say 'Jesus' and eight out of 10 people will come to Christ. ... Then we find a house and start a church. ... We're trying to catch up with what the Holy Spirit is doing inside the country. The ground is fertile. If you want to sow into a ministry that will give back a hundredfold, Iran is ready."

Working Under Persecution

But there is already a new wave of persecution against Christians, according to the U.S. government and ministries such as Open Doors. Pastors and converts from Islam are regularly interrogated, beaten and imprisoned.

Police burst into church services to frighten congregations.

Christians are routinely excluded from good jobs and schools. Although martyrdom is not common, the government is now considering making the death penalty mandatory for anyone who leaves Islam. And pastors still face dire threats. In 2005, a church leader was killed at his front door.

The government also tries intermittently to clamp down on the free flow of information. In the last few years it has jammed satellite signals during Christian programs, banned high-speed Internet service, closed Internet cafés, destroyed satellite dishes and censored blogs. Arab advertisers sometimes threaten to boycott stations that carry Christian programs.

Spies also have infiltrated online church meetings and gathered information on the people involved. Now underground church members use elaborate techniques to verify the identities of participants. They also disallow the sharing of information such as names and locations during online meetings.

Today the Hovsepien brothers and Open Doors are using A Cry From Iran to give American churches a glimpse into life in the persecuted church. The brothers travel around the U.S. to share their testimonies, show the documentary and answer questions about Iran. They are convinced that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

“You look at the numbers at the time [of our father’s death]: Assemblies of God churches had 1,000. The total number of Christians in Iran was 2,000,” Joseph says. “Now it’s 100,000. I think that is something even my dad didn’t expect to happen. ... All of that speaks of the power of the blood of the martyrs.”

“One of the direct results of martyrdom in Iran has been the increasing zeal of Christians, especially Muslim-background Christians,” Andre says. “When they see an Armenian man, my dad, who gave his life for Iran and for his faith, that really

increases their passion for God.

“They ask, ‘Why would someone give their life?’ And this journey starts within them. Then they go tell their friends, and this is how it multiplies.”

Joel Kilpatrick is an author and award-winning reporter based in Los Angeles. To order *A Cry From Iran*, go to acryfromiran.com or hov . The documentary includes footage of Haik Hovsepian’s music, additional profiles of Iranian martyrs and other special features.