

How God Is Crushing Demonic Strongholds in This Muslim Country

Tensions between America and Iran escalated in January after the U.S. killed Iranian military leader Qasem Soleimani. Although news coverage may make it seem like most Iranians are enemies of U.S. Christians, the truth is much more complicated. Multiple sources confirm to Charisma that an underground church movement is alive and growing in Iran. A recent documentary, *Sheep Among Wolves, Volume II*, highlights the growth of Iran's underground Christian church in the face of intense persecution from the Iranian government. Although many American Christians fear the day they may lose their religious freedom, the leaders of Iran's church movement say persecution is actually what makes their church strong.

Iranian Christians refer to the state of many Western believers as "spiritual sleepiness." One woman in the U.S. begged her husband to move with her to Iran, because she says in America, there is a "satanic lullaby" that puts American Christians to sleep. She says she perceives the complacency she witnessed as a greater threat than risking her life to spread the gospel in a country like Iran.

In this way, Ellie Bagheri, outreach coordinator for Discipleship for Iran Ministries, says persecution in Iran has become an unexpected witnessing tool:

"When Iranian officials encounter men and women who refuse to deny Christ while risking torture and imprisonment, they encounter people who have found something life-changing and worth suffering for," Bagheri says. "That in itself is a testimony more powerful than any sermon."

Hormoz Shariat, president and founder of Iran Alive

Ministries, tells Charisma one Iranian Christian called to tell him that he got arrested after starting house churches. He had to seek medical treatment for the beatings he received. But the man told Shariat, "Pastor, do not give up. Don't worry about us. I had the honor of being tortured for Christ. Do you remember Psalm 23? I had the honor of experiencing that verse in the torture chamber. How can you experience that if your enemies are not there? My enemies are there, but my sweet Jesus was there also."

Charisma interviewed leaders in the underground church movement in Iran—as well as others who understand the dynamics of Iran's church—and noted four common themes:

Islam is losing its credibility in Iran among both Christians and non-Christians alike.

Jesus is utilizing supernatural means, including visions and dreams, to reach Iranians.

The Western model of church does not work in Iran—for various reasons. For example, women are even leading the movement as much as, if not more than, the men.

Many Iranians are pro-Israel.

This story will explore the implications of these findings for Iran and the world.

Losing Credibility

Shariat has spoken to many Muslims through his work with Iran Alive Ministries and says many of them are frustrated with Islam. Mosques across Iran are reportedly emptying.

"Christianity has more credibility and respect among a large number of Muslims than Islam itself," Shariat says. "Iranian Muslims used to say, 'Islam is good, and it's just the government that has a problem.' No, Iran has passed that point. It has come to the point that many say, 'Islam has

major flaws and problems itself.' People are fed up with the hypocrisy of what Islam has done to this society. And every time things happen [in the news], another layer of the veil of Islam is removed. People look at what Islam is, and a greater number of people will be abandoning Islam and coming to Christ."

One Iranian underground church leader says the 1979 Islamic Revolution played a major role. (This leader, hereafter referred to as Henry, has asked to remain anonymous for security purposes.) During that revolution, the regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi—the last monarch of Iran—was overthrown by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Khomeini promised the people utopia yet brought about mass destruction, leading many Iranians to distrust the government and abandon Islam.

"The supreme leader supposedly heard from God," Henry says. "But after 'hearing from God,' we saw the worst devastation in the history of the Persian empire. This is why people hate the government. Every Iranian is passionate about God—now we're just starting to introduce them to the real God. They're open because of the persecution. Everyone is seeking."

Visions and Manifestations

Iranians' increasing rejection of Islam has made them more open to other religions, including Christianity. And Jesus is utilizing supernatural means to reach some of these former Muslims, sources tell Charisma.

Though many American Christians don't believe Jesus physically appears to people anymore, Joel Richardson, who co-produced *Sheep Among Wolves, Volume II*, describes a recurring phenomenon in the Middle East that challenges that belief. Multiple people describe remarkably similar encounters in which a "man in white," identified by many as Jesus, appears to them.

While interviewing a woman from Afghanistan, Richardson

referenced cessationist theology: “John MacArthur, a well-known preacher here in the States, says that Jesus is not really appearing to Muslims. What do you have to say about that?”

The woman responded, “I don’t know who John MacArthur is, but I do know the man in white who has been appearing to Muslims.”

Henry says he’s met many Muslims in Iran who report seeing this “man in white.” He even says one Muslim he met wrote down the entire Gospel of John due to the “man in white” appearing to him and telling him to do so. This Muslim—who lived in a mud hut and had no electricity, gas or phone line—had never even heard of Jesus.

The man told Henry, “A man in white knocks on my door every night. And every time I open the door, I can’t look at his face, but he tells me to write these things down.”

“How long has he been coming?” Henry asked the man, and the man gave him the notebook containing the words he’d been commanded to write. Henry was astonished to discover it was the entire book of John, verbatim. He concluded that Jesus had been visiting the man every night. Eventually, Henry says, the whole city came to Jesus because of this man’s testimony, and he was forced to flee for his life.

Bagheri says these kinds of miraculous visitations by Christ are actually the main way Iranians come to faith.

“In the West, we see many come to Jesus through gospel presentations or God’s Word,” she says. “But the vast majority of Iranians come to know Christ through dreams, visions or miracles. Our Iranian pastor describes them as the spiritual languages of the Middle East. Dreams and visions are familiar concepts in Middle Eastern culture, and they are the avenues through which Christ reveals His truth to many Iranians.”

Western Differences

Richardson says discipleship in Iran is the main reason why their churches are flourishing. That said, the Western model of church—such as the typical Sunday morning services—doesn't work well in Iran.

"The way that we in the West do church is not always conducive to discipleship," Richardson says. "In that sense, I would say it's the focus on Sunday church that can be the problem in the West. 'Christian' [in America] is defined by someone who goes to church regularly, whereas biblically, a Christ follower—a Christian—is a disciple; it's someone who's actively engaged in an obedience-based relationship."

Bagheri says large events, such as conferences, cannot be held in Iran for security reasons.

"All Christian seminars are held in the neighboring countries that Iranians can travel to, in order to minimize the risk of being discovered by the government," she says. "Evangelical efforts within Iran are strictly based on reaching individuals, such as family members and close friends, as opposed to large groups. One-on-one evangelism is the safest and most effective model for the Iranian community."

The leadership structure of the underground church in Iran may also seem uncommon to many American believers. Western churches often feature a hierarchy: one lead pastor, some assistants with lesser authority beneath him and increasingly less power down the chain. By contrast, the documentary says that, in Iran, "the leadership is decentralized and it's distributed. It's not based around a particular individual or skill set or gifting. It's built around an Ephesians 4 framework of empowering everyone in the body [of Christ] to be all things to all men with the fullness of the power of the Holy Spirit being manifest through all of us. ... The entire body of Christ should have the yoke of leadership upon them for disciple-making, for the apostolic, for the prophetic, for the evangelistic, for the pastoral and for the teaching."

That includes women, too. Though the Iranian church is not exclusively led by women, Richardson says a large percentage of Iran's underground church is female-led. One contributing factor is Iran's abuse record. Sadly, it is not uncommon in Iran for a woman to have a history of being poor, raped and beaten. Yet this fact has reportedly driven women to be some of the most passionate disciple-makers. They want to create a better culture.

"Virtually every woman in Iran probably has faced some level of sexual harassment or outright rape or abuse, either by bosses or by family members, " Richardson says. "In a place of profound brokenness in that culture, the Lord is using the most broken. These women—in their healing and their restoration—are among the most deliberate and passionate [evangelists], now that they have been set free from so much of the pain they've had to endure."

Women have not risen to power in the church out of a desire to rebel against authority, according to the documentary. They are gentle and submissive—and willing to risk their lives to obey the Great Commission.

Henry says, in a way, persecution opened the doors for many women to preach and lead in Iran. He says in America, Christians have the freedom and time to debate theology and question whether women should be pastors. But in Iran, sharing the gospel is a life-or-death issue—and men need all the help they can get.

"There is a place for women to be leaders," Henry says. "If you look at Genesis, God created man and woman together. Man and woman together is the perfect image of God. If you're under persecution, you don't have these theological debates. In America, we spend too much time not fulfilling the Great Commission.

"...That's why we have these childish and baby debates, because

we're not focused on spreading the gospel [while] people are going to hell."

Blessing Israel

Iran is the nation with some of the greatest leverage to spearhead an attack on Israel. But could Israel's greatest threat become its greatest ally? Multiple sources say these former Muslims have now become pro-Israel; when they fell in love with Jesus, they also fell in love with the Jewish people. This could not only change the future of Iran, but that of our entire world.

"More and more Muslim Iranians are saying [to the government], 'Why should we hate Israel? Just because you told us?'" Shariat says. "'We don't trust you. Israel has not done anything to us, but you have.'"

The Islamic Republic of Iran may be building its nuclear weapons program to potentially attack Israel. But Persia—renamed Iran in 1935—was historically a blessing to Israel. Many Iranian Christians want to be a blessing once again, according to Henry.

"One thing you have to realize is, Persians aren't Arabs," he says. "The Persians are actually cousins with the Jews. If you look in the Old Testament, the only people group that blessed the Jews from the beginning to the end were Persians. Esther spoke with what king? Nehemiah got permission to build the walls from what king? All Persian kings. Cyrus is named 'My anointed.' The only other person named that in the Bible is Jesus. ... This is why God is moving so powerfully in Persia. The Persians don't have a hatred toward Israel."

Bagheri echoes that sentiment, explaining that even the non-Christian Iranians do not see eye to eye with the government on the matter of Israel.

"Although the Iranian government carries a strong anti-Israel

narrative, you would find that the actual citizens of Iran are fairly supportive of Israel or at least neutral on the matter," she says. "Iranians who become Christians simultaneously become some of the strongest prayer warriors for Israel."

Just as Iranian believers are interceding for the Jewish people, U.S. believers can begin blessing Iran today by praying. Bagheri also says concerned Christians can donate to nonprofits that help the Iranian church, listing Discipleship for Iran, Heart for Iran and Elam Ministries as trustworthy organizations. To learn more, they can visit . But perhaps the most important thing believers can do, Bagheri says, is evangelize Iranians in their own cities.

"Reach Iranians in your area," she says. "Many Iranians in the U.S. travel back to Iran to visit their families. Reaching one Iranian here could lead to the gospel spreading to an entire family in Iran."

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