

Iran Declares House Churches a Threat

Iran's government is finally taking off the gloves.

According to a report from Iranian Christian News Agency Mohabat News, the minister of intelligence of Iran announced that house churches are a threat to youth.

Along with that comes an effort to fight the growth of the house church movement in Iran. Todd Nettleton with The Voice of the Martyrs says, "In the last year, we have seen a real change of tone in government reports in the speeches of leaders there, from basically ignoring the church and ignoring the growth of the church, to now speaking out forcefully against the church and against people becoming Christians."

It seems that disillusionment has been growing since the Iranian Revolution. The main body of protestors was composed of young people—a fact that has not been lost on the religious leaders in the country. That so many seem to be turning to Christ also has implications. Nettleton explains, "They see Christianity as a tool of the West to try to reach into Iran, to try to create a lack of stability, and ultimately to try to undermine the government."

As such, it is likely that a strong government reaction is in the offing. "I think where they will go is really where they are already headed. That is: arresting Christians, arresting leaders—particularly those who are actively evangelizing and those who are leading house church groups," he says. "Those are the people they are locking up in prison."

In spite of an expected crackdown, Nettleton remains optimistic. The government can't silence everyone. "When you talk about the growth of the church in Iran, it's being fueled by the gospel. It's being fueled by satellite television

ministries, by other ministries who are providing Bibles and providing help into Iran," he says. "But in the eyes of the Iranian government, this is all a tool of Western society to try to influence the direction of Iran."

Now that the Advent Season is upon us, the message of Christmas will be hard to erase. "This is a time where Christians are celebrating. It's a time where perhaps they are sharing the gospel and sharing the story of Christmas," Nettleton says. "So I don't think it's a surprise that the government would say, 'Beware of this 'threat.'"

Last year on Dec. 26, according to Mohabat News, Iranian authorities raided house churches as well as private homes of Christians and arrested hundreds of Christian converts. This year, it is believed that similar attacks are coming and will be more organized. "We can pray," Nettleton urges, "that Christians will know how to answer the questions that they face from Iranian authorities. Secondly, I think we can pray for continued growth of the church."

In the meantime, spiritual openness has created a hunger. "Voice of the Martyrs will respond by continuing to support the Church there, providing the tools that they request to spread the gospel," Nettleton says, "and to disciple new believers and build the church inside that country."

Pray that the body of Christ will continue to multiply and mature despite persecution. Pray that the government will be open to change and allow full rights and protections.