

Monday 16th March

Iran today Pop: 83 million Muslims: 90-95%

Let's begin the week looking at the situation in Iran today and the backdrop against which God is working and doing amazing things.

Persia, as Iran was known before 1935, was one of the greatest empires of the ancient world, and the country has long maintained a distinct cultural identity within the Islamic world by retaining its



own language and adhering to the Shia interpretation of Islam. The vast majority of Iranians, 90-95%, are Shia Muslims. Iran became an Islamic republic in 1979 following a revolution during which the monarchy was overthrown and clerics assumed political control under their supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini.

Today leaders want to control every aspect of life. For example, public dress and behaviour are regulated by 'morality police.' There are systematic crackdowns on political activists, anti-government demonstrators and human rights defenders. The government is hostile

towards anything Western. Iran is described by some as a prison-like country in chaos. An estimated 13 million live under the poverty line. Opium addiction is reaching epidemic levels. There are approximately 200,000 street children. Prostitution is widespread, though hidden. Natural disasters (earthquakes and floods) exacerbate the challenges people face. Three-quarters of Iran's population live in cities, where they struggle with rapid and massive population growth, inadequate infrastructure and deadly pollution. Iran is rich in oil as well as agriculture and livestock, but external economic sanctions and internal corruption have strangled the nation's economy.

When petrol prices were raised in November last year, nationwide protests erupted and turned violent before security forces quashed them amid a near-total internet blackout. Tensions with the US escalated in early January this year when a US drone strike killed powerful Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad on the order of President Trump. Iran retaliated by targeting US forces but then accidentally shot down a Ukrainian airliner in Iranian airspace, killing all 176 people on board, in a tragedy that sparked anger at home and abroad. The government's denial and cover-up just added fuel to the anger. Protests began again with people calling for Ayatollah Khamenei to step down. The Iranian election that was held at the end of February had the lowest turnout of voters since 1979 and was seen as a sign of people's opposition to the leadership. The result has given hardliners control of every branch of government.

- Ask God to raise righteous leaders who will honour the sanctity of human life and human freedom.
- Pray for a radical change in Iran that would lead to a more prosperous economy as well as the lifting of sanctions which have inevitably compounded the misery of average Iranians. Pray that Iran will become a blessing to the world economy.
- Pray for a significant reduction in unemployment, especially among the country's youth. Lack of job prospects has caused many Iranians to feel depressed. Pray for the hope and peace of Jesus to expel despair, depression and fear.

Sources: <https://www.mnnonline.org/news/protests-in-iran-the-crackdown-a-missing-christian-activist-and-the-aftermath/>
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/iranians-mark-revolution-anniversary-high-tension-200211082811068.html>
<https://www.prayercast.com/persian.html>
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14541327>

Tuesday 17th March

Sheep among wolves – the world’s fastest growing church

“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.” Phil 3:8

Last August, Frontier Alliance International released a film about the rise of the world’s fastest



growing church, in Iran. This profoundly challenging film, *Sheep Among Wolves Part 2*, describes a rapidly-reproducing discipleship movement that has brought more Iranians to faith in the last 30 years than in the last 1,300 since Islam came to this country in the 7th century. It is a church on fire for Jesus. Leaders within the movement attribute the growth of the gospel to severe persecution at the hands of the regime. Regimes have tried throughout history to get rid of God’s people, but it has often backfired. Exodus tells us that ‘the more

they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread (1:12). Open Doors ranked Iran as 9th in the 2020 World Watch List. Christianity is seen as a Western influence and a threat to the country.

The makers of the film met leaders of the church outside Iran. They described how inside the country, mosques are empty and many do not follow Islam. After more than 40 years of Islamic law, Iran has suffered the worst devastation in its history and its people are disillusioned with this religion and are searching for hope. The growing church is made up of Muslim background believers. They have no church buildings, no funding, are not recognised, have no property or assets and no central leadership and are predominantly led by women. These leaders include former drug dealers and addicts, former atheists and failed suicidists, former radical Shia extremists and former prostitutes.

The powerful and deeply challenging film, *Sheep Among Wolves*, has a profound message for the Western Church. Watch it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SAPOLKF59U>.

- Let’s rejoice for all that God is doing in this country, as He reveals Himself to thousands of ‘nobodies’ of Iranian society for whom Jesus came to bring healing and hope (Luke 4:16-21).
- Thank God for the growth and spread of His church in this country and that, despite such persecution, so many are choosing to follow Him.

- Spend a few moments pondering the suffering of the persecuted church in the Islamic Republic of Iran and consider how much you might suffer for your faith. Have we in the West settled for being genuine believers but never true disciples? Let's pray for God's Spirit to help us to love the lost and proclaim Christ in all we do and say.

Sources: <https://www.prnewswire.com/il/news-releases/faistudios-announces-new-film-sheep-among-wolves-vol-ii-300889205.html>

<https://www.mnnonline.org/news/protests-in-iran-the-crackdown-a-missing-christian-activist-and-the-aftermath/>

<https://prophecytoday.uk/comment/church-issues/item/1599-sheep-among-wolves.html>

Wednesday 18th March

Testimony of an Iranian woman

"And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death." Rev 12:11

In the film we mentioned yesterday, testimonies were recorded about what God has done for Iranian women, many of whom have been beaten, oppressed, raped and silenced. These women know they will be killed if their decision to follow Jesus is found out, but they have chosen to offer themselves as living sacrifices for God. Their focus is on grace, mercy, forgiveness and thankfulness – with the film giving one instance of a woman forgiving a past rapist having read Genesis 3 and God's forgiveness of Adam and Eve. This is her story:

"I grew up in a military family. When my father retired he went into business with another man and he often came to our home. From the age of 5 he raped me. This went on for many years but I was too afraid to tell my father. Eventually my mother found out and she told my father. From that day on, my father began beating me.

My mother was an atheist and she told me that God did not exist. I became depressed and began taking pills. On five occasions I took an overdose to try and kill myself. Finally, I decided to hang myself. First I took an overdose and said to God that if he was real I wanted Him to reveal Himself to me. I put the noose around my neck and jumped. Everything went black and then I saw Jesus and I was on His shoulders. He told me he would always protect me.

When I regained consciousness, I was lying on my bed. I got up and saw the loosened noose on the floor and the marks on my neck. I had not been able to cry for two years but that day I cried for hours and through my tears I knew God was healing me and I knew Christ. I stopped taking the pills that day. At my father's funeral, the man who had raped me came to the burial. I tried to hide from him, but he found me. I felt the Holy Spirit tell me not to be afraid but to forgive him. Immediately my heart was healed."

These Iranian disciples will pay whatever price is needed for their Messiah. They need our prayers and support.

- Let's thank God for His loving mercy to Iranian women who have suffered so much. As so many choose to follow Him and share their belief with others, pray they will be strong to endure.

- So many of these believers are living for the next life, not this earthly one and seeing God deliver them in their circumstances and not out of them. They consider their lives nothing as compared to the joy of knowing Jesus and sharing this incredible truth with others. Let's pray they we ourselves and the church in the West will live with the same passion for God.
- Praise God that despite efforts to quash the gospel message, Jesus's timeless message is spreading like wildfire in this nation.

Thursday 19th March

More evidence of God at work among Iranians

"Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade." Mark 4: 30-32

Jesus tells us in Mark's gospel that he can do a lot with a mustard seed (4:30-32). Each believer can have a huge impact on the people around them. In Iran, many believers are fervent in their passion for God and in sharing the freedom and truth they have found with others. Movements to Christ among Iranians show no sign of slowing, despite the current rulers doing all they possibly can to slow the growth of the church inside Iran.

Believers meet secretly in small house fellowships. They cannot meet in buildings; it is illegal to produce Christian literature or hold church services in Farsi. If an Iranian leaves Islam, it is punishable by the death penalty, although it is more likely to be seen as a crime against national security. God is not only working inside Iran but among the tens of thousands of Iranians living in the diaspora. Fruitful Iranian leaders who live in the West minister in multiple ways to their own people in person and through satellite TV and internet ministries.

In 2019, Heart 4 Iran registered over 60,000 online decisions by Iranian people who became followers of Christ. Their staff prayed with over 3,500 additional Iranians who gave their heart to Jesus in 2019. They say that these trends cannot be ignored because they are indicative of a large, mass transformation of a country.

- Pray for the nationwide distribution of the Word of God and Christian literature, for the effective use of the internet and 24 hour radio and satellite television programmes so that all of Iran and Iranians worldwide will hear His voice. Let's thank God for these wonderful ministries and ask Him to continue to reach people through them.
- Let's pray that God through His Spirit will bring about a deep conviction such that the whole nation, young and old, men and women in the cities and rural areas of Iran and in the diaspora will fall on their knees individually or in households and groups and cry to God and repent.
- Ask for a national spiritual revival to sweep the country and for true religious freedom in Iran.

Source of some material: <https://www.mnnonline.org/news/protests-in-iran-the-crackdown-a-missing-christian-activist-and-the-aftermath/>

Friday 20th March

Nowruz – the Iranian New Year

Most Persians are warm, gracious, family-oriented food-lovers (their cuisine is world-renowned) who enjoy picnics, long walks, and celebrations, especially the Iranian New Year celebration called Nowruz. Today is the beginning of Nowruz in Iran. It is a celebration that lasts for thirteen days. The word Nowruz is a combination of the Persian words 'now' meaning new and 'ruz' meaning day. It is one of the oldest celebrations in the world. You can watch a fun, short clip explaining more here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSljMxxBKO8>



Nowruz is celebrated at the exact moment of the Spring Equinox so this marks the first day of Spring and of the Iranian calendar. There are many interesting traditions, such as jumping over bonfires, while saying: "Give me your redness (energy) and take away my yellowness (sickness)." Another tradition includes setting a table with symbolic items called haftseen.

On the thirteenth day of Nowruz, Iranians leave their houses to enjoy nature and picnic outdoors. Many

Iranians go on holiday at this time of year to other countries. It is a fantastic opportunity for our field workers to share the Good News with them. When greeted by someone who speaks their language and wants to share about Jesus, many are willing to listen, take a New Testament and agree to read it and pray for God to reveal Himself to them.

- Please pray for our workers in different countries who reach out to Iranians in many ways with the love and hope of Jesus.
- Pray for the thousands of Persians who hear the gospel message and receive tracts or New Testaments; that the Father will reveal Himself powerfully to each of them and they will share this message with their local communities.
- Instead of asking for the fire's redness, pray for Persians to experience the fire of the Holy Spirit at work in their hearts, leading them to call on the red blood of Jesus that was shed for them!

Saturday 21st March

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei – the supreme leader

“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day.” John 6:44

Prayercast have produced a short video about Iran’s leader: <https://www.prayercast.com/ayatollah-khamenei.html>

Iran is the only country in the world that is ruled by Islamic clergy. Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei’s decisions not only affect 83 million people in Iran but millions across the globe.



From a family of Muslim clerics, Ayatollah Khamenei was a devoted follower of Ayatollah Khomeini who led the 1979 Islamic revolution. After Ayatollah Khomeini’s death in 1989, Ayatollah Khamenei was appointed the Supreme Leader. His position is for life. His control of the Revolutionary Guard, a vetting committee loyal to him, guarantees that the religious clerics have authority over the civil government. He thus has power over the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government, as well as the military and media. He also confirms the election of the president.

It appears that Ayatollah Khamenei has become an even more merciless dictator than the Shah of Iran he helped overthrow. Yet we know that God appoints leaders for His purposes. In the film we mentioned earlier this week, *Sheep Among Wolves*, it was said that it is Ayatollah Khamenei’s treatment of his people that has led to him becoming an outstanding recruit for the gospel and for the incredible growth of the church in Iran.

We know that he is old and now unwell and it is uncertain how long he has left to live.

- No one is beyond God’s mercy and grace. Pray that God will touch Ayatollah Khamenei’s heart and he will be saved amid failing health.
- Pray his power and influence will bring many of his followers to salvation.
- Pray for revelations of Jesus and access to God’s Word for him and his entire family.

Sources: <http://www.prayforiran.org/Sites/English/Ayatollah%20Khamenei/tabid/294/Default.aspx>
<https://www.prayercast.com/ayatollah-khamenei.html>