



Iran

Islamic Republic of Iran

Asia

Geography

Area 1,648,196 sq km. Situated between the Caspian Sea to the north and the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman to the south. A central desert ringed by mountains.

Population	Ann Gr	Density
2010	75,077,547	1.19%
2020	83,740,317	1.06%
2030	89,935,691	0.63%

Capital Tehran 7,241,000. **Other major cities** Mashhad 2.7 million; Esfahan 1.7mill; Karaj 1.6m; Tabriz 1.5m; Shiraz 1.3m; Ahvaz 1.1m; Qom 1.0m. **Urbanites** 69.5%. **Pop under 15 yrs** 24%. **Life expectancy** 71.2 yrs.

Peoples

Approximately 100 ethnic groups, but dominated in population by Persians and Azerbaijanis.

Iranian-Median 67.9%.

Persian 52.4%. Persian 40.9%; Mazanderani 5.5%; Gilaki 5.5%; 22 other small groups.

Luri-Bakhtiari 6.6%. Luri(2) 3.5%; Bakhtiari 1.5%; Laki 1.5%.

Kurd 5.9%.

Baloch 1.5%.

Other Iranian-Median peoples 1.5%. Including Aimaq, Parsee, Pashtun, Tajik, Talysh.

Turkic 25.9%.

Azerbaijani 22.2%. Azerbaijani 18.0%; Qashqai 2.3%; Khorasani Turk 1.1%; 11 other groups.

Other Turkic peoples 3.7%. Turkmen 3.1%; 5 others. **Arab** 2.3%. Iranian Arab 1.8%; 3 others.

South Asian 2.3%. Domari (Gypsy) 2.0%.

Other 0.5%. Armenian, Georgian, Jew, West European, East Asian.

Literacy 82.4%. **Official language** Persian (Farsi; Dari and Tajik are major dialects); almost all Iranians speak some form of Persian as a mother tongue or second language. **All languages** 79. **Languages with Scriptures** 4Bi 6NT 7por.

Economy

Great wealth in oil and natural gas, which supply 80% of export earnings. Inefficiencies in the industry and infrastructure undermine profitability. Only 20% of the economy is in the private sector. Corruption and political-religious belligerence put off many potential foreign investors. Recent reforms (or at least attempts at such) aimed at income redistribution and job creation have not rendered sufficient change. Rapid urbanization and earlier rapid population growth created millions of jobless, young urbanites – unemployment recently peaked at 28%. Iran's strategic location – between East and West, between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf – could help generate greater future economic growth.

HDI Rank 88th/182. **Public debt** 19.4% of GDP. **Income/person** \$4,600 (10% of USA, in 1982 it was 18%).

Politics

The Shah was deposed in the Shi'ite Muslim Revolution, and a theocratic Islamic Republic declared in 1979. Invasion by Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 1980 consolidated the rule of the Ayatollahs. Hardship caused by the war led to a more pragmatic approach in the 1990s, which culminated in a decisive victory for Reformists in the 1997 presidential election. But Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamanei ensured the Reformists were thwarted; their resulting inability to effect change led to the election in 2005 of hard-liner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. His promises to improve the lot of the poor and to reinstate the original values of the revolution generally failed and led to expectation of his defeat in the 2009 election. His unexpected victory sparked massive anti-government demonstrations of an intensity, scale and longevity that surprised many. The government's response was ruthless, with thousands arrested and some sentenced to death. The opposition retreated, but still exists. Iran's determination to develop nuclear power and strong belief in this right unites almost all Iranians, but creates fear in the rest of the world despite assurances that such ambitions are for energy purposes only. The mishandling of this issue by the West could have disastrous consequences for the whole region.

Religion

Shi'a Islam is the state religion, and 89% of Iranians follow this. Sunni Islam is respected and largely followed by the Turkmen, Kurd and Baloch populations. The Iranian attitude toward religion can seem contradictory – heavy-handed but laid back, very chaste in public but much less so in private. The courts have the right to impose the death sentence on male

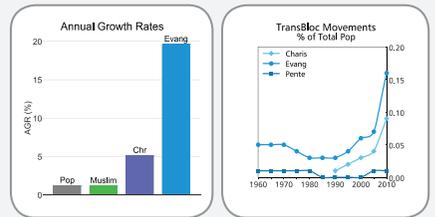
apostates and life imprisonment for female apostates. Historic religious minorities such as Jews, Zoroastrians and Assyrian and Armenian Christians are recognized by the constitution, but the Baha'i are not. Effectively, Iran is a religious dictatorship where little of consequence can occur without the approval of the Mullahs.

Religions	Pop %	Population	Ann Gr
Muslim	98.64	74,054,491	1.2%
Christian	0.51	384,897	5.1%
Baha'i	0.40	300,310	-1.2%
Non-religious	0.28	210,217	7.2%
Other	0.15	112,616	4.1%
Jewish	0.02	15,016	-1.2%

Christians	Denoms	Pop %	Affiliates	Ann Gr
Protestant	21	0.02	12,000	4.3%
Independent	1	0.15	110,000	22.4%
Anglican	1	<0.01	<1,000	5.6%
Catholic	1	0.04	30,000	4.6%
Orthodox	4	0.31	232,000	-0.2%
Marginal	3	<0.01	<1,000	-0.4%

Churches	MegaBloc	Congs	Members	Affiliates
Armenian Orthodox	O	200	150,000	200,000
Indigenous believers	I	1,000	65,868	110,000
Assyrian Ch of the East	O	65	15,000	30,000
Catholic Church	C	57	16,484	30,000
Assemblies of God	P	3	2,000	5,500
Evang Ch (Presbyterian)	P	14	1,703	3,100
Russian Orthodox	O	10	1,316	2,000
Other denominations[23]		25	1,773	4,297
Total Christians[31]		1,374	254,144	384,897

TransBloc	Pop %	Population	Ann Gr
Evangelicals			
Evangelicals	0.2	117,678	19.6%
Renewalists			
Charismatics	0.1	64,330	18.6%
Pentecostals	<0.1	5,500	6.1%



Answers to Prayer

1 Disillusionment with the Islamic Revolution still grows and spreads. Thirty years of war, economic hardship, a strict authoritarian government and lack of freedom yield widespread disappointment, especially among the younger generation. Iranians' sense of disconnectedness with their rulers – and even with their national religion – makes them exceptionally open to the gospel. The long and respectable history of Christianity in Persia, the Church's noble suffering under persecution and the natural bridges between Shi'ism and Christianity make for unprecedented opportunities for church growth. There is a great hunger for the good news and for authentic spirituality.

2 Massive numbers have recently been coming to Jesus. From only 500 Muslim-background believers in 1979, conservative estimates now suggest over 100,000 MBBs in Iran, a number rapidly increasing. Some, more optimistic, place this number as high as a million. Never since the 7th Century has the Church in Persia grown so fast as post-1979, and the most recent years are the most fruitful. In a country able to apply the death sentence for apostasy, this underground church multiplication is a remarkable move of the Holy Spirit. Signs and wonders, dreams and visions seem to abound.

3 Ministry to Iranians has grown exponentially, both inside Iran and abroad. Christian satellite-TV broadcasts and Christian websites in Persian languages are having an unprecedented impact and reach even to remote villages with the gospel. The increasing availability of Scripture – brought mostly by hand-couriers – is also very significant, as is the emphasis on training national Christians to share the good news and lead house groups. All of these fuel and sustain the remarkable growth of the Church in Iran.

Challenges for Prayer

1 The many promises of the Islamic Revolution, made over 30 years ago, have yet to materialize. The peace and prosperity that strict adherence to Islam was supposed to deliver have never materialized. Instead, a legacy of bloodshed, cruelty, injustice, extremism and

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economic deprivation discredits the conservative religious leaders and the narrow brand of Islam they promote. Repression, corruption, injustice and human rights abuses are frequent; religious leadership controls the police, army and judicial system. Strong allegations of fraud in the 2009 elections sparked widespread and continued protests, an indication of the frustration felt by millions. Pray that corruption and repression might end and a government that provides true justice and safety for all be established.

2 **Iran's political, economic and social situations are fragile** and mystify many outside observers. It is an ancient, noble and proud civilization, but one that in the modern era seems set on irritating allies and provoking everyone else. The ruling elite are as pragmatic as they are unpopular.

a) Politically, Iran has a strong regional foreign policy, seeing itself as a regional superpower. This fuels a volatile attitude toward the West and Israel, accusations of financing of terrorist groups, and expansion into the power vacuum left by the conquest of Iraq. Such actions could be attributed to the fact that, for most of the last 1,500 years, Iran has been dominated by foreign powers. It also points, at least in part, to attempts to prepare the way for the *Madhi*, the future Imam who, according to Shi'ism, will establish Islam as the global religion and will defeat the Antichrist.

b) Financial prospects do not inspire much hope, despite vast oil and gas deposits and long-stated rhetoric about empowering the poor. Steady inflation and squandered oil wealth combine with aborted or failed economic reforms to instill low confidence in the future. Unemployment rises to over 30% for those under age 30. An estimated 13 million Iranians live below the poverty line.

c) Social breakdown is evident as never before. The widespread and illegal underground party-circuit flouts Islamic values. Around 200,000 of Iran's best-educated young people emigrate every year, and 36% of Iranians aged 15-29 expressed an intention to do the same. There are nearly five million drug addicts (Iran has the highest rate of opium addiction in the world), 200,000 street children and a very large number of prostitutes. Pray that those facing pressure and hopelessness might find release and hope in Christ; there is greater openness than ever to the gospel and a great need for Christian ministry to these groups of desperate people.

Pray that Iranians' aspirations for greatness, prosperity, freedom, and even righteousness might be expressed honourably and ultimately in reverence for and worship of Jesus.

3 **Religious persecution** of certain minorities has intensified since 2005. This is particularly aimed at the Baha'i (a religion that originated in Iran but not recognized as a valid religious group), at Sufi Muslims and at Christians, especially believers from a Muslim background. According to the state, only Armenians and Assyrians can be Christian – ethnic Persians are by definition Muslim, and therefore ethnic Persian Christians are by definition apostates. This makes almost all Christian activity illegal, especially when it occurs in Persian languages – from evangelism to Bible training to publishing Scripture and Christian books. Yet the regime's harsh treatment of Christians only further fuels the flames of church growth. Pray that the body of Christ might continue to multiply and mature despite persecution.

4 **The majority of the wider Christian community** are Christian Armenians with a smaller number of Assyrians and Chaldeans. They are cultural and linguistic islands isolated in a Muslim sea. While they live in relative peace, their fear of persecution and of job and educational discrimination, as well as their desire to offer their families a more stable and promising future, drive many to emigrate, denuding Iran of the richness of communities that predate Islam by centuries. Pray for a work of the Holy Spirit in these often-nominal churches, that Jesus might shine through their lives and that they might have a burden for their Muslim neighbours.

5 **Evangelical churches** before the revolution were generally small and struggling, and they contained very few Muslim-background believers. The traumatic changes and suffering that followed the revolution gave churches a brief period of renewal, outreach, literature distribution and many conversions. Barriers among denominations broke down. The hostility of the regime toward evangelicals caused much greater interest in Christianity among Persians – Presbyterians and Assemblies of God, especially, grew as a result. Intimidation, infiltration and martyrdom of several church leaders, and pressure from the government to not welcome Muslims into services, have caused many churches to adopt house church models. Most churches that meet publicly now tow the government line and do not overtly evangelize Muslims. Pray for:

- a) **Adequate income for Christians** who face poverty both from general economic decline and from religious discrimination in the workplace. Emigration is a solution for pressured Christians, but their vital witness in needy Iran is then lost. Pray that believers may break through this economic pressure and resist the temptation to leave.
- b) **Courage and fortitude** such that their persecutors are won for Christ. While Armenians and Assyrians are discriminated against, Muslim-background believers are actively persecuted. Pray also for greater freedom for churches to minister, as they long to do.
- c) **Protection and deliverance for all MBBs.** The large majority meet secretly in small house groups. There is always a danger that such meetings could be discovered and those involved punished, especially the leaders. A decentralized cell structure and the use of techniques honed by the underground party-circuit help house groups avoid detection and arrest.
- d) **Churches outside of Tehran** often face more intimidation as fundamentalist forces exercise more control in less-urban areas. Many towns and villages lack any churches at all. However, this is changing due to the increasing influence of the Internet and satellite TV as well as the enthusiasm of young Iranian Christians to evangelize their countrymen. House church movements are spreading throughout the country.

6 The Iranian Diaspora is around four million. Most have found refuge in the USA, Canada, Western Europe, Turkey, Gulf States and other lands – where they can be evangelized. Western countries are making it harder for Iranians to immigrate. Pray for:

- a) **Diaspora churches.** There are probably about 800 Persian-speaking Iranian churches and house fellowships, totalling around 200,000 people. Unity is frequently a challenge. Yet these diaspora Christians are highly active and generous regarding ministry into Iran and among other Iranians abroad; their contribution in this regard is crucial.
- b) **Ministries reaching out to the diaspora**, providing not only evangelism tools and outreach but also church planting, discipleship and leadership training, so that Iranians living abroad will be reached and hopefully then reach other Iranians. Christian refugees fleeing from persecution are also assisted. Many diaspora Christians visit Iran and powerfully minister to their countrymen. Significant ministries include Elam Ministries, 222 Ministries, Persian World Outreach, Iran Alive Ministries and Iranian Christians International.

7 Young people are particularly responsive to the gospel. With nearly two-thirds of the population under age 30, with disillusionment at an all-time high and with frustrated desires for freedom, there is a unique window of opportunity to impact this generation with the liberating good news about Jesus. Political, economic and social frustrations are often expressed in resentment against the regime and in increasing hedonism and materialism. Pray that the unmet longings of their hearts might be fulfilled as they meet Christ. Already, much of the underground church is made up of this younger generation.

8 Leadership training and development are absolutely vital if the burgeoning Church in Iran is to continue to grow and mature. The countless house churches need to see capable leaders trained, and these leaders in turn must be taught to train others as Iranian fellowships keep multiplying. Much training of Iranian Christian workers occurs abroad. Elam Ministries operates residential courses in the region and in Europe; much of their material has been filmed for wider distribution. There are growing numbers studying via correspondence courses, with one online Bible college in Persian having over 500 students. Short-term training courses are happening in several regions as well. Other Iranians study in English-language programmes. Pray for the development and distribution of programmes that will cultivate many passionate, capable and well-trained leaders for the underground Church in Iran.

9 Missions are not free to minister in the land, but some tentmaking opportunities arise and tourism is actively encouraged. Pray for the door to Iran to open in God's perfect timing. Millions remain unevangelized. Pray also for agencies around the world to pray, plan and network together with Iranian believers in preparation for that day.

10 The spiritual needs of religious minorities:

- a) **The Zoroastrians or Parsees** follow an ancient Persian monotheistic religion, founded 1,000 years before Christ. Many of them fled before Islam in the 7th Century and settled in Gujarat, India. There are between 35,000 and 100,000 Parsees in Iran. There are many bridges

between Christianity and Zoroastrianism, so they are potentially a very responsive people; pray for loving and insightful ministry that will reach them with the gospel.

- b) **The Baha'i**, whose religion has spread worldwide since the 19th Century, are persecuted severely in Iran. They are regarded by Muslims as a heretical sect for their belief that their founder, Baha'u'llah, is a prophet after Mohammed. The government seeks to drive them from Iran through mistreatment, intimidation, prejudice in education and employment, and destruction of sacred Baha'i sites. Very little Christian love and witness has been shared with the 300,000 Baha'i in Iran or among the five million worldwide. Pray that in their desperation they may find refuge in the Lord Jesus.
- c) **The Persian-speaking Jews** are descendants of those exiled to Babylon 2,700 years ago. Due to pressure and harassment, their numbers are declining through emigration. A number have become active, witnessing Christians.

11 **Less-evangelized peoples.** Iran contains some of the largest unreached, unengaged peoples in the world. Dozens of peoples have no known believers among them, but the multiplication of churches and Christian resources in Persian and other languages is seeing that change. Some organizations are committed to seeing church planting movements among every people in Iran. Pray specifically for:

- a) **The nomadic and semi-nomadic Luri and Bakhtiari and the Turkic Qashqai**, largely unreached peoples who live in the Zagros Mountains. There are only a few dozen known believers from these groups. Their mobile lifestyle makes church planting among them a challenge. Scripture, Christian radio and the JESUS film exist in some of their languages and dialects. The use of Farsi as a trade language also gives them access to further Christian resources. Persian Christians are beginning to reach out to these peoples. Pray that the small groups of believers and seekers from these groups, meeting both inside Iran and abroad, might grow and multiply.
- b) **The various Kurdish peoples** of northwest and northeast Iran. They continue to face economic hardship and political and cultural suppression from the regime (which they usually oppose). Most are Sunni Muslims. There are some Christian resources in the dialects of the Kurdish language. Pray that the increasing numbers of Kurds in Iraq who are coming to faith in Jesus might, in turn, influence their kin in Iran.
- c) **The Turkic Azeri and Turkmen** in the north are closely related, but have scarcely had any positive contact with Christianity. Azeris form the largest minority group within Iran; their population is usually underestimated. It is listed here as 13.5m, but could conceivably be double that. Praise God for the completion and distribution of the Azeri NT, Psalms and Proverbs, while the OT is nearing completion – pray that the availability of Scripture in their heart language might spur many to read and be transformed. The traditionally nomadic Turkmen live in a geographically isolated area, but there are the beginnings of a church among this people.
- d) **The peoples of the southeast** – the Baloch and Brahui. The Baloch are restive and unhappy with Iranian rule; hostilities and lawlessness appear to be increasing. There are only a handful of believers, but Christian resources such as radio and the JESUS film are increasing in number.
- e) **The Gypsy communities** include the Domari and the sub-groups Ghorbati and Mawari. They number 1.3 million people. Their low social status and semi-nomadic nature keep them relatively unknown in Iran. There are no Christian workers dedicated to reaching them.

12 **Christian help ministries** are an important component in reaching Iranians and providing resources for the burgeoning Iranian Church. Many media ministries and resources have emerged in recent years.

- a) **Bibles** are in very short supply and very high demand – 10 million Bibles would be readily received. It is illegal to print and distribute the Scriptures, yet they continue to slip into the country. Several ministries, especially Elam Ministries and Open Doors, focus on increasing the availability of Scripture to Iranians. There are three translations of the Bible in Persian, with another version due out in 2012. Pray for innovative and effective ways of distributing God's Word and for a deep impact to be made through it. Pray also for translation teams to be raised up for the other languages that have a need for Scripture translation.

- b) Christian literature**, when available, is much sought after, but many more publications are needed, especially in Persian. Elam, 222 Ministries, Sohrab Books, Persian World Outreach, Iranian Christians International and others are involved in production and distribution. Pray also that the Lord will raise up more indigenous writers to produce Christian material to meet the accelerating demand from the Iranian Church. Pray that God will continue to open new avenues for distribution. Pray specifically for the development of children's materials – a glaring need with 15 million Iranians aged 15 or younger.
- c) Radio** remains a valuable ministry. Millions listen despite government restrictions, and thousands of response e-mails and letters are received. Voice of Christ Media Ministries, **TWR** and others prepare daily programmes in Persian and Azeri and broadcast them on satellite, shortwave and medium wave.
- d) Other media** include Christian and worship music (very popular with the younger generation, in particular) and film, including the raft of materials associated with the JESUS film. Pray for these to have a great impact.

13 TV ministry is an area of huge growth for reaching Iranians. Many ministries pour resources and efforts into developing videos for evangelism and Christian teaching. Possibly 20 million illegal satellite dishes are used to access television broadcasts. Stations such as **SAT-7** Pars, Nejat TV, MOHABAT TV, and producers such as Iran Alive Ministries, 222 Ministries, Elam Ministries and others reach millions through this popular medium. Live worship broadcasts with music and teaching prove especially effective. Pray also for the development of Christian video programming and materials for youth and children, who constitute such a large swathe of Iran's population.

14 The Internet is another powerful tool for the evangelization of Iran, enormously popular among young people in particular. It is the ideal medium for a host of materials – readings, audio and video – in Persian. Many ministries are developing resources, from evangelistic sites to Christian news, to teaching materials to worship music in the main languages of Iran. Just a few examples – Farsi Christian News Network, Kalameh, Farsinet, Iranian Christian Broadcasting, Online Kelisa, Farsipraise Ministries, PWO and many others. Around 23 million Iranians have access to the Internet. Iran is the world's third-largest blogging community, but the regime is very active in shutting down sites that pose perceived threats to the status quo. Over 40 million have mobile phones – another potential but unexploited means of transmitting the good news. Pray for the vast potential of the Internet to be realized for reaching Iran with the good news and for building up the body of Christ.