

“Credibly documents what appears in Iran to be the greatest response to Christ among Muslims ever known in history!

“From an analysis of recent political history and the efficacy of house churches, one can now understand why so many Iranians have bowed their knee to the Lord Jesus Christ.”

– **Greg Livingstone, founder of Frontiers mission agency and author of *You’ve Got Libya***

“When I want to understand what is happening behind the opaque walls surrounding modern-day Iran, I always turn to Mark Bradley. Mark’s lucid writing and extraordinary research provide the reader with an unforgettable experience of seeing what God is doing and how He is at work giving birth to His kingdom today inside the Islamic Republic of Iran. I highly recommend to any follower of Jesus Christ, Mark’s latest book: *Too Many to Jail*.”

– **David Garrison, author, *A Wind in the House of Islam***

“We have worked with Elam for many years. We feel privileged to have personal connection with some of those whose stories Mark tells, and count them our friends. It is a privilege to endorse this book.”

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“Without exception history proves that persecution always provides fertile soil for the growth of His church through the Gospel. Read and see this truth delineated in the story of Iran.”

– **Pastor Johnny Hunt, former President, Southern Baptist Convention**

“A precise, honest and informative account of ordeals of a growing (Muslim-background) Christian population inside Iran. This affirming message of perseverance, hope and faith will excite and challenge the reader... a must read.”

– Dr. Mike Ansari, Director of Operations,  
Mohabat TV

Also by Mark Bradley

*Iran: Open Hearts in a Closed Land* (Authentic, 2007)

*Iran and Christianity: Historical Identity and Present Relevance*  
(Continuum, 2008)

# TOO MANY TO JAIL

The Story of Iran's New Christians

**Mark Bradley**

With a foreword by Sam Yeghnazar

MONARCH  
BOOKS

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*This book is dedicated to all the  
known and unknown Christians who  
have suffered for their faith  
in recent years*

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Due to the ongoing hostility of Iran's government to Christianity many names in this book have been changed.

## FOREWORD

At heart I am a house church Christian.

I became a believer sixty years ago in Iran, in my own home. From 1956 until 1960 my father held a house-church meeting in Tehran – *every night*.

In these house-church meetings there was worship, intercession, Bible teaching, and we left wanting to win others to Jesus Christ.

Of course in many ways our meetings were very different to those happening all over Iran today. But I still see connections between them, especially when I see the spiritual zeal of today's house-church Christians. Their enthusiasm reminds me of the enthusiasm we all felt as we worshipped God in our home all those years ago. I count it an extraordinary privilege that God has allowed me to be so involved with this story of Iran's new Christians. What a blessing to be able to rejoice with them and to weep with them. I wish I could take you with me to the Iran region and let you meet them. You would laugh a lot, and perhaps cry a lot too, and I promise you, you would return to your own situation with your faith in Jesus Christ refreshed.

You would discover that Iranians are incredibly open to the Gospel. They have always had a special love for Jesus, and now, after thirty-five years of experience of the Islamic Republic, they are ready – more than ever before – to hear about Jesus.

You would also see for yourself that the Scripture “whoever calls on the name of Lord will be saved” (Acts 2:21) is true: for the Iranians who turn to Jesus experience Him in wonderful ways. You would have to spend several weeks with me if you wanted to hear all the true stories about Jesus rescuing Iranians

from miserable situations. I can tell you about suicidal people kept from taking their own lives, drunks becoming sober, drug addicts delivered, shattered marriages being restored, abused women forgiving their tormentors. Our Jesus is in Iran, serving the broken-hearted.

Iran's new Christians have paid a high price for their faith. Hundreds have been arrested. Sixty are in prison as I write. But still the house churches have continued to grow. There is no turning back, even for those who have suffered. Jesus has proved Himself to them; they are not willing to deny Him. Because they have experienced His love so much they love Him, even from behind dark prison bars.

When I was in my twenties, while working with established churches, I travelled over all Iran with a small team of volunteers giving out Scriptures. We visited hundreds of towns and villages. And we prayed that God would establish churches in these seemingly small and obscure places of which most people had never heard.

Building churches in all these towns and villages did not seem practical then. When later the Islamic government unleashed its hostility against Christianity, it was completely impossible. To enable the Gospel to spread, we needed house churches.

And I knew house churches would work, because of my own experience as a young Christian in my father's house church. But it is not just the format that has impact in people's lives. Behind my father's house church lay the power of prayer. My father spent many days seeking God and had an overwhelming experience with the Holy Spirit in the mid-1950s.

Much spiritual water was to flow from my father seeking God. He started what was almost certainly one of Iran's first house churches. Some of Iran's later Christian leaders can trace their spiritual foundations back to that prayer meeting. The superintendent of the Assemblies of God churches

in Iran, Haik Hovsepian Mehr, and his younger brother Edward, both became Christians in my father's house. In January 1994 I was conducting a baptismal service when news came that my dear friend Haik had been murdered. In his role as superintendent he had been campaigning for the release of Mehdi Dibaj, a Muslim convert sentenced to death for apostasy from Islam. Mehdi Dibaj also used to attend my father's house church.<sup>1</sup>

Another Christian leader who attended those initial meetings was Tateos Michaelian. He went on to become the Moderator of the Presbyterian churches of Iran. He was the translator of over sixty Christian books into Persian. Just like Haik and Mehdi, he too became a martyr. Before his death he had graciously accepted my invitation to be a member of the translation team for the New Millennium Version of the Bible. After his martyrdom we called the translation, "The Michaelian Project".

Like many others my faith was formed in my father's house church, and when I talk to people involved in today's Iranian house churches, I see they are learning what I had learned in my father's meetings: intensity, vibrancy, zeal for the Gospel. My heart rejoices, and somehow I see a connection between my father's intense prayer life and the house church he started, and today's house-church movement. In our meetings back in the 1950s there was a lot of intercession for all of Iran. Those prayers have continued, all over the world. Now in recent years we are starting to see the answer to those prayers.

I – and other leaders of my generation – rejoice. We are also aware that we have a great responsibility. We are thankful that Iran's new Christians do not have an arrogant, unteachable spirit, but that they look to us older Christians for help and support and encouragement: to be their spiritual fathers and mothers.

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 3 for his final testament.

I believe the story of Iran's new Christians is an important story for the wider church. The story shows that God has special times. Thirty years ago Iranians were not so open to Jesus Christ, now they are. We must know what hour it is and act accordingly.

The story also shows that formal church structures in countries like Iran are limited. House churches have a vital role to play in the growth of the church – not just in Iran, but elsewhere too. It also shows how crucial the role of the wider church is, and how older Christians have a duty to join with new churches to help and support them. This book emphasizes that this is not just a story about Iran's new Christians; it is a story about Iran's new Christians – in partnership with the church at large.

Finally, the story shows that we are all engaged in a serious business. There is a price to pay. Being a true Christian in Iran is not for the double hearted. The knock on the door from the police can come at any hour of the day or night. But even when there has been suffering, as this story already shows, it is the church that triumphs, not its enemies. Because of the church in Iran having been persecuted for the last thirty-five years, it is fitting that this book is dedicated to all those who have suffered. But the end of the story does not take us to a lonely prison cell, but to thousands and thousands of homes across Iran where God is worshipped in the Spirit through Jesus Christ.

I repeat. This is an important story, and I commend Mark Bradley for telling it to the wider church. I trust that, as you read, you will be encouraged and excited to see what God is going to do in whichever story of which you are a part.

Sam Yeghnazar

## INTRODUCTION

In early 2011 the wife of a Christian prisoner was called to report to the offices of the MOIS (Ministry of Intelligence and Security<sup>2</sup>) in Tehran. This is the Ministry that had orchestrated the arrests of at least 114 Christians in fourteen cities across Iran since the end of 2010. By the end of 2012 the agency would have arrested over 300 Christians.

During the interrogation the wife of the Christian prisoner was asked if she knew why her husband was in prison. She replied, "Because of his Christian faith."

She was surprised by her interrogator's response.

"Of course not. Your husband isn't in prison because of his religious faith. If we arrested people for religious reasons, there would be no room in the prisons."

MOIS has a vast budget and many staff. Since the house-church movement has moved onto its radar since at least 2005 no expense has been spared to monitor the activities of Christians. Phones are bugged, suspects are trailed, and when Christians are arrested their laptops and mobiles are confiscated so contact lists can be analysed. This is almost certainly the organization that knows more accurately than any other exactly how many house-church Christians there are in Iran.

And here's the answer: too many to put in prison. For when the interrogator said "religious reasons" he was making reference to the fact that according to Islamic law, a person born into the Muslim faith cannot convert to another faith. This is

<sup>2</sup> Known as Ettalat in Iran. Vezerat-e Ettela'at Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran, literally Islamic Republic of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence, is the primary intelligence agency of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It is also known as VEVAK (Vezerat-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar) or VAJA, as well as MOIS. I shall use "MOIS" in this book.



the “religious reason” the state employ to imprison Christians.<sup>3</sup>

So, there are too many Christians to put into prison in Iran, one of the most closed countries in the world. Given the hostility of the Islamic Republic to active Christians for the last thirty years resulting in the murder of at least six evangelical pastors, the closure of churches, the banning of the Bible and Christian literature, and the arrests of hundreds, one might have expected the Iranian church to have withered away.

The opposite has happened. Instead, the church has been growing vigorously. New branches have appeared in towns and villages of which most church leaders have barely even heard.

In my earlier book, *Iran: Open Hearts in a Closed Land*, I looked at what made Iran such a closed country and why the Iranian people were so open to the Christian Gospel. That book, at just over 100 pages long, was published in 2007. I expanded this subject in more detail a year later in *Iran and Christianity: Historical Identity and Present Relevance*.

A lot has happened since then: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s presidency; the bitterly disputed 2009 elections; Iran’s ongoing showdown with the West over its nuclear programme; a very marked increase in the government’s persecution against Christians; and overwhelming evidence that there has been dynamic growth in the new house church movement, the home of Iran’s new Christians.

This is a big story – a dramatic story. It is full of tears of joy

<sup>3</sup> While Iran is an Islamic Republic and the judiciary dominated by the clergy, nevertheless the Sharia interpretation of how to punish apostates from Islam (death for men; life imprisonment for women) has not been cemented into the country’s legal system. It was a part of a draft proposal for a new legal code in 2008, but this failed to win the approval of parliament. This reflects a reasonably consistent theme in the Islamic Republic: when something Islamic threatens the Republic – the wholesale execution of Christians and others would create an international storm, if not a *casus belli* – pragmatism and the Republic wins. The rejection of the implementation of Sharia law regarding apostates is, however, not just about pragmatism; it also reflects that within the Iranian body politic there is this other non-Islamic identity that tends to be more tolerant. This is discussed in Chapter 5. For more information about Iran’s constitution and apostasy see: <http://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1156&context=njihr> Accessed 2 July 2014.

– and tears of grief. As I write, at least sixty known house church Christians are in prison. They and their families are suffering. Hundreds more have been forced into exile. One day they have normal lives, the next their world is squeezed into a suitcase and they are heading for a strange land. They too are suffering.

Yet out of this suffering Iran’s new house churches have experienced unprecedented growth. Indeed not since the seventh century have there been so many Christians in Iran. And – as you will see as you read on – their numbers are almost certainly set to rise.

The purpose of this book is to tell this story. Chapter 1 establishes that all the talk about the church growing in Iran is not Christian hype. It is reality. It is where all the available evidence leads. The following three chapters examine how the average Iranians’ relationship with their national religion became first bruised by the Islamic Republic, and then under Ahmadinejad, infected. Many became disillusioned with Islam. But why were so many wanting to find out about Jesus Christ? This question is answered in Chapter 5.

Iranians are open and are joining house churches. This is reported in the Christian press. But what exactly is meant by a “house church”? This question is discussed in Chapter 6 in which I look at the different stories of five house churches (there are many others). Drawing on what we learn from these five accounts, Chapter 7 questions what it is that connects these house churches together and how it is that they have been playing such a crucial part in Christianity’s growth in Iran.

The story ends, in Chapter 8, by looking at the strange equation of suffering and growth that appears in so much church history, including the last ten years of Christianity in Iran.

While I very much hope that this book will help you understand the growth of the church in Iran, I also hope it will inspire you afresh to give yourself to intercede for Iranian

Christians – both for those who are suffering in prison, and for those who seek to be salt in their ancient land.

This book is dedicated to them.

## CHAPTER 1

---

# HOSTILE GOVERNMENT, FASTEST-GROWING CHURCH IN THE WORLD

**Mahmoud Ahamidinejad: “I will stop Christianity in Iran.”**

Along with many other Muslims, the former president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has two problems with Christianity. One is that he sees the faith as being inferior – it came before Islam, God’s final revelation. This is the theological issue. The more pungent problem is that he sees Christianity as being deeply corrupt.

A brief glance at the “Christian”<sup>4</sup> nations of the world soon provides ample evidence of this corruption for many Muslims. Most obvious is the brazen promotion of sexual lust. Nudity is emblazoned on advertisement hoardings, paraded on stages, broadcast onto millions of TV screens. In terms of mental images the difference between Islam and Christianity is not theological, but physical. Muslim women cover up; Christian women bare all.

Now the “Christian” West has given the final proof to all decent Muslims that its depraved, dissolute, and degenerate societies will soon be pounded by Allah’s wrath: some Western governments have legalized homosexual “marriage”.

The Islamic revolution mixed together Shia Islam’s backing

<sup>4</sup> Many Iranians, especially those who have not travelled abroad, consider the West (America, Europe, and Australia) to be Christian. The actual number of churchgoers in these countries is irrelevant to this perception.

for the oppressed with a left-wing loathing for Western imperialism and stirred this into Iranian nationalism. This powerful political concoction bought millions to the streets. Ahmadinejad and his supporters still see the world in this way – and hence find Christianity guilty of gross corruption. For it is the creed of the imperialist: the Spanish in South America; the Russians in the Caucasus; the French in North Africa; worst of all the British – and most recently the Americans – all over the world, and at present<sup>5</sup> on three of Iran's borders: in Iraq, the Gulf, and Afghanistan.

Built into the DNA of the Iranian Revolution is a hatred for the Western imperialism that turned vast swathes of the Islamic world into Christian-controlled colonies.<sup>6</sup> The whole point of the Islamic revolution was to expel all the influence of these “arrogant” powers, together with their corrupt religion from Iran – and the whole of the Middle East.

The most noxious example of imperialism in the Middle East for Muslims like Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is Israel. And Christianity is very much a guilty partner in this invasion of Islamic lands. While the father of political Zionism is considered to be Theodore Hezl (1860–1904), a Jew, in fact the idea in modern times for the Jewish people to have Palestine as their homeland originated with Christians. Puritans wrote about it during the Reformation period, and then Zionism became popular in the nineteenth century when the Plymouth Brethren leader, John Nelson Darby (1800–82), the man behind dispensational theology,<sup>7</sup> made Zionism a pre-condition for the return of Christ. While Darby's teaching has been questioned

<sup>5</sup> As of February 2014.

<sup>6</sup> To appreciate the humiliation felt by Muslims over Western imperialism see Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong?*

<sup>7</sup> Darby taught that history should be divided into several dispensations – that is, different periods of God's dealing with Man from creation to the final judgment. This paradigm has had significant influence on American Christianity through its promotion in the Scofield Bible.

by many Christian leaders,<sup>8</sup> nevertheless it is still very popular, especially in the southern states of the USA. Well-known Christian preachers have been ardent advocates. In alliance with the Israeli lobby their voice has influence in Washington. It is not surprising, then, that Iranians of Ahmadinejad's ilk easily think of Christianity and Zionism as almost being one and the same.<sup>9</sup>

Linked to imperialism, and providing further proof of Christianity's corruption, are the well-documented atrocities committed by the Western powers. First on the list is the Crusades, especially Richard I of England's sack of Jerusalem, followed by the murder of all the city's Muslim residents. There was also the genocide of the American Indians by the “Christian” settlers; the genocide of the aborigines by the “Christian” settlers in Australia; the slave trade – the Christian British selling of Africans to the Christian Americans. And each time Ahmadinejad courted curses by questioning the scale of the Holocaust he reminded the world that the barbaric burning of the Jews happened in a Christian country. And the Nazis were voted into office by a country where 94 per cent of the population were registered as Christians.<sup>10</sup>

Sexual lust, imperialism, Zionism, atrocities – these are the associations that come with the word “Christianity” when mentioned by President Ahmadinejad and his supporters. For a strong Iranian leader to give any quarter for inferior Christianity to spread would not only be insulting the Islamic faith, God's final revelation on earth, but, much more dangerously, it would open the door to decadence, licentiousness, and the habitual

<sup>8</sup> Examples include John Stott, Colin Chapman, and, most recently, Stephen Sizer.

<sup>9</sup> Christians are often accused of being Zionist. In July 2013, for example, 28-year-old Ebrahim Firouzi was arrested and charged with “promoting Christian Zionism” by “attempting to launch a Christian website, contact with suspicious foreigners and running online church services”. See <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/07/2623421/> Accessed 11 June 11 2014.

<sup>10</sup> <http://jdstone.org/cr/files/hitlerworkingthethechristiancrowd.html> states “According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, in the 1930s Protestants constituted 49 per cent of the German Christians; Catholics about 45 per cent.” Accessed 11 June 2014.

imperialism of the “Christian” powers, all of which are already on display in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Given this association it is then not surprising to find that when Ahmadinejad became president in 2005 he proclaimed: “I will stop Christianity in Iran.” As a president who enjoyed the full support of the Supreme Leader, the Revolutionary Guards, and the judiciary, Ahmadinejad had access to all the levers of power by which to crush Christianity in Iran. The law was firmly on his side. Christians from Muslim backgrounds were said to be guilty of “apostasy”, a crime in religious courts, which, at the discretion of the judge, could carry the death sentence for men and life imprisonment for women. Given the nature of the international church, Christians could easily be framed as a threat to national security. During Ahmadinejad’s presidency hundreds of Christians were arrested and there was indeed an unprecedented attempt to “stop Christianity”.<sup>11</sup>

But Christianity has not been stopped.

The complete opposite has happened.

Christianity has been present in Iran since at least the second century. The faith thrived there until the arrival of Islam in the seventh century. Since then Christianity was in decline and became associated with two minority ethnic groups: the Assyrians who trace their roots back to the early Nestorian church, and the Armenians who were brought to Iran in the seventeenth century<sup>12</sup> (see Appendix 1 for an account of Christianity pre-1979).

After the Arab invasions it was unheard of for thousands of Iranian Muslims to become Christian. However in our generation, at a time when Iran is ruled by a government implacably opposed to Christianity, this is exactly what has

11 See Chapter 8.

12 The Assyrians and Armenians who generally belong to the Eastern Orthodox family of Christians are still a presence in Iran. However since 1979 there has been a dramatic decline in their numbers (see Chapter 8). Whenever the Islamic Republic refers to Christians, it means these ethnic minorities specifically.

happened – and continues to happen.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad vowed to “Stop Christianity”.

Here is irony.

During those very years when Ahmadinejad was president the church grew more rapidly among Muslims than at any other time in Iran’s recent history.

## **Church growth – it’s where the evidence leads**

In 2007 a conservative estimate<sup>13</sup> for the number of Persian-speaking Iranian Christians from a Muslim background in Iran was put at between 50,000 and 100,000.<sup>14</sup> Seemingly a small figure in a country of (then) 66,000,000 inhabitants, 100,000 Muslim converts in Iran was, relative to the past, a historic number. Twenty years earlier there were around just 500 Christians from a Muslim background. Something significant had been going on.<sup>15</sup>

Now in 2014 the most cautious estimate is definitely 100,000,<sup>16</sup> and the conservative estimate is 370,000.<sup>17</sup> Another view<sup>18</sup> argues that due to satellite TV and the internet there are now thousands of isolated unconnected believers, and this source believes the more likely figure is 700,000.

If the 370,000 figure is correct this then means that

13 There were then a number of preachers who enthusiastically talked of there being over a million Christians in Iran in 2007. The figure probably had more to do with their enthusiasm than with accurate research.

14 The numbers of ethnic Assyrian and Armenian Christians have been decreasing since the 1979 Revolution.

15 This is fully explored in my Iran.

16 I was verbally given this figure by a house church leader with an extensive network inside Iran; and the same figure was quoted by a senior leader with a satellite TV agency.

17 The mission agency, Open Doors, states this: “An estimated 200 Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) were living in Iran 40 years ago, according to Open Doors. Now, the number of MBBs is estimated to be 370,000.”<http://www.christianpost.com/news/open-doors-growth-of-christianity-in-iran-explosive-71946/> Accessed 6 February 2014.

18 This is the view of a senior leader in an agency with a long history of serving the church in Iran.

Christianity among Iranians from a Muslim background, has grown by 200 per cent in the last seven years; about 28 per cent per year. This means that Iran has the fastest-growing church in the world.<sup>19</sup> This conclusion is backed by one of the most respected sources for statistics on church growth in the Christian world, Operation World. This agency records Iran's church growth among evangelicals as being 19.6 per cent.<sup>20</sup>

There is no exact picture, but there are three areas of evidence that when put together confirm there has been serious church growth in Iran in recent years. It is not borne of hype and Christians getting over-excited. The available evidence might only be able to paint an impressionistic picture, but the impression left is very clear. In this closed Muslim land there has been church growth.

The three areas that can be looked at are:

1. The response of Iranians inside Iran to ministry (Scriptures, books, TV, internet);
2. Reports from those involved in church planting;
3. The high numbers of arrests.

## Response to ministry to Iran

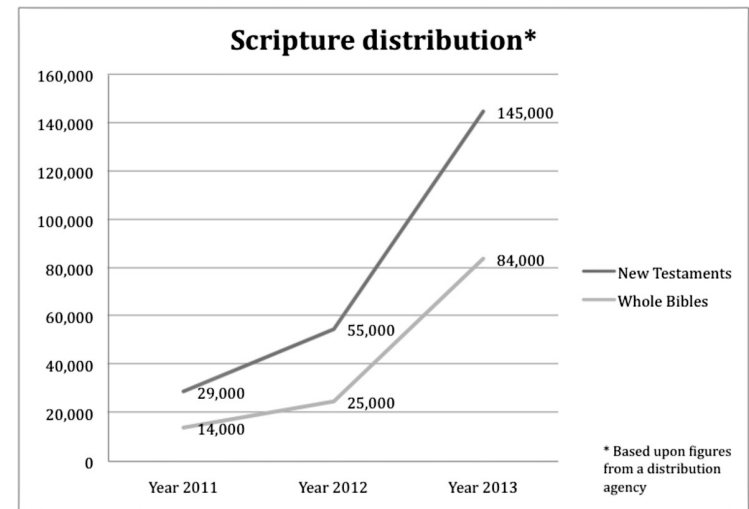
### *Scriptures and books*

The ever-increasing demand for Bibles and New Testaments is double-edged evidence. First of all the demand shows that Iranians in general want to read the Christian Scriptures. But there is more. As a rule whole Bibles are not given to non-

<sup>19</sup> Landinfo, a human rights group that produces reports for the Norwegian Immigration Department, emphasizes it is impossible to say what the true number of converts to Christianity is. However, these researchers make this significant statement: "In the opinion of Landinfo, and source material on which this report is based indicated a tendency towards growth in the volume of house churches during recent years." See "Iran: Christians and Converts", Landinfo, July 2011, p. 10. See [http://www.landinfo.no/asset/1772/1/1772\\_1.pdf](http://www.landinfo.no/asset/1772/1/1772_1.pdf) Accessed 22 May 2014.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.operationworld.org/hidden/evangelical-growth> Accessed 13 May 2014.

Christians, but only to believers with some sort of standing in a house church. The agency Elam Ministries, one of the most active in bringing Scriptures to Iran, has printed 1.2 million copies of their new translation of the New Testament in the last ten years. Many of these will have been used in evangelism. However they have also printed over 40,000 whole Bibles since 2007.<sup>21</sup> These are for believers. The graph below, based on figures from another agency, tells the same story: an increase in demand both for New Testaments – and whole Bibles.



Despite the thousands of New Testaments and Bibles these agencies are dealing with, their leaders say they cannot keep up with the demand. Elam Ministries is keen to print another one million New Testaments and provide hundreds of thousands of whole Bibles. Yet another agency would like to have at least half a million Bibles and New Testaments a year to meet the demand.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> From the 1990s Elam Ministries has been providing the Iran Region with what is known as the 1895 Persian Version. In 2014 the New Millennium Version of the whole Bible is published. This is a modern and accurate translation, comparable to the New International Version or English Standard Version in English.

<sup>22</sup> As revealed in conversation with a leader from that agency.

Reports from inside the region reveal three constants about the response of Iranians to the Christian Scriptures. One is that more are always wanted. The second is that 99 per cent of people receive them warmly (there are many beautiful stories of Iranians who seek a message from God who are then being given some Scriptures). The third is the hostility of government authorities. One group of smugglers were told: “You can bring in alcohol, you can bring in drugs; but never bring in these (New Testaments).” There is even a report that the authorities burnt confiscated Scriptures.<sup>23</sup>

The response to books also shows there is great interest in Christianity in Iran. Agencies such as Elam Ministries report there is a constant demand for more Christian books in Persian in Iran. All books have to be sent in to the country as it is illegal to print Christian literature in Iran. When they arrive, they essentially disappear – such is the demand.

### *Satellite TV and internet*

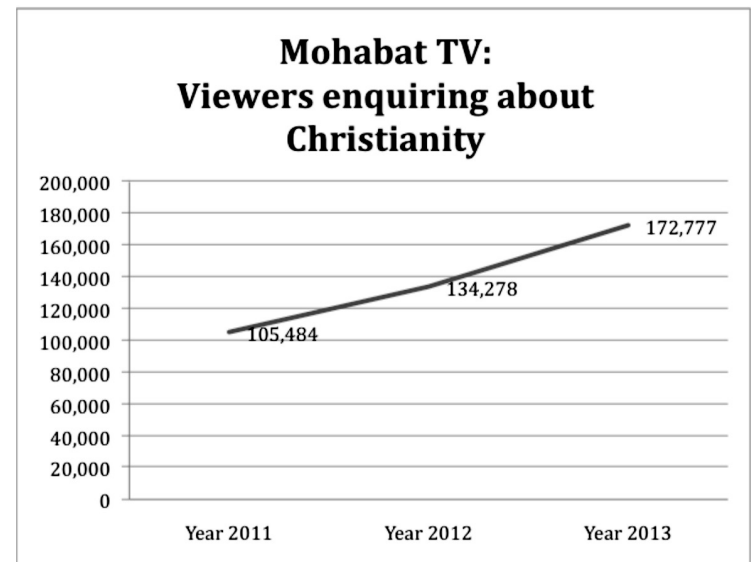
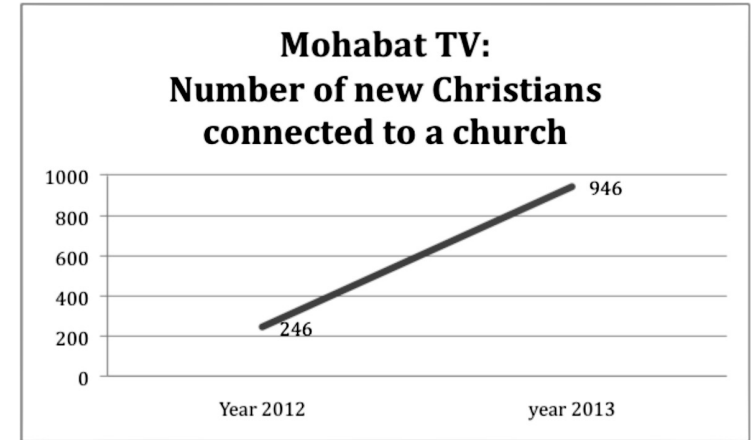
Christian satellite TV has been beaming into Iran since 2001. The broadcasters are certain that people are not only watching their programmes, but also responding. This was proved in 2006 when one of the channels, “Mohabat” (Love), asked a professional marketing company to carry out research within Iran to get a feel for how many people were watching their programmes. They were encouraged by the results. After interviewing 1,500 individuals in three different cities the researchers report that 200 of those interviewed (40 per cent) watched Mohabat programmes, and 40 (3 per cent) said they had wanted to experience Christ after watching the broadcasts.<sup>24</sup>

Seven years on and Mohabat’s annual report of 2013 shows the interest in Christianity is increasing. There has been a 160 per cent increase in their viewing figures; a 23 per cent increase

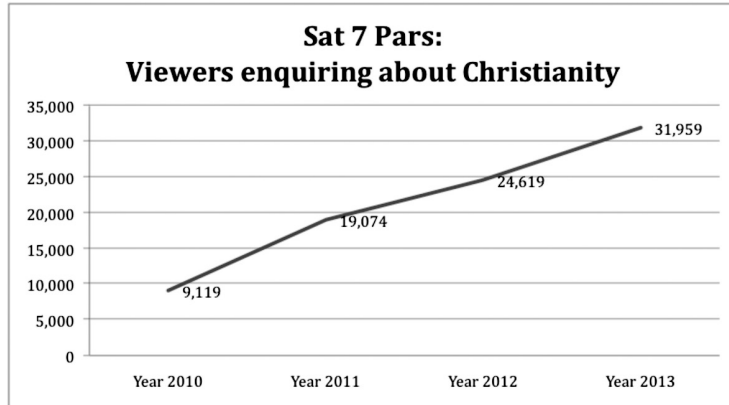
23 <http://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/watchwomanonthewall/2011/08/iran-launches-bible-burning-campaign.html> Accessed 11 July 2014.

24 I was given private access to this report.

in the number of people becoming Christians through their programmes; and a 300 per cent increase in the number of people being connected to house churches. Response to their internet ministry tells the same story (see graph).



Research from the Christian broadcaster Sat 7 Pars reaches the same conclusion. A 2011 survey carried out inside Iran showed that 1.7 million people over the age of fifteen watched Sat 7 programmes, and a further 5 million were aware of the channel.<sup>25</sup> And, as the graph shows, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of viewers contacting them – over 240 per cent<sup>26</sup>



Another major Christian broadcaster is Dr Hormoz Shariat whose channel Network 7 provides round-the-clock programming, seven days a week. Dr Shariat has no doubt that his programmes attract millions of viewers. And it is clear viewers want to find out more. Dr Shariat's agency Iran Alive Ministries reports 10,000 visitors per month in its evangelistic web chat rooms. There have also been plenty of conversions: since 2002 his agency has recorded over 27,000 documented decisions of Iranians turning to Christ.<sup>27</sup> However Dr Shariat

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.sat7uk.org/about/countries/iran> Accessed 27 March 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Figures contained in an email from Sat 7 staff received 31 March 2014.

<sup>27</sup> In a private letter to me Dr Shariat wrote: "One hard stat is the number of people who have contacted us for the last twelve years that we have been on the air. Over 150,000 people have contacted us and we have the names of over 27,000 people who have either prayed with us to receive Christ or have indicated that they have done so through watching TV programs."

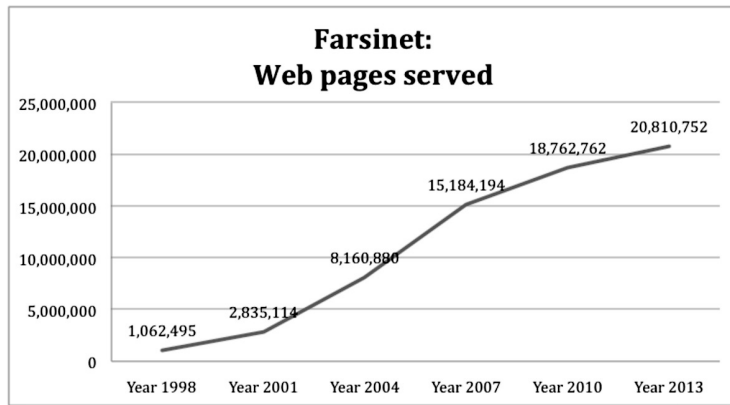
is certain that many more Iranian Muslims are becoming Christians – but believes they are keeping quiet about their new faith because of the security situation. This is very likely. Dr Shariat suggests that for each recorded decision, there are another nine unrecorded ones.<sup>28</sup> This would then mean that his ministry alone has seen well over 200,000 come to faith in the last thirteen years. Given that up to 50,000,000 Iranians have access to satellite TV<sup>29</sup> it is of course impossible to give an exact figure regarding how many have come to faith in Christ through Christian programming.

One of the most comprehensive sources for evidence about the interest in Christianity in Iran is the internet ministry "Farsinet". Launched 21 March 1996 this was one of the first Christian websites for Persian speakers. From the very start the agency has used an independent web service<sup>30</sup> to track responses to its site and the story painted by the statistics is easy to understand – it shows there has been a year-by-year increase. In the first ten years (1996–2006) the number of page requests shot up from under 200,000 to 13 million. Remarkably, the statistics so far for 2014 show that the requests now number 20 million.

<sup>28</sup> The former head of programming at Sat 7 makes the same point regarding viewers who believe, but are shy about their faith. In a private email to me it was stated: "There are many people (we witness some of their testimonies every day on our channel) to whom the public concern and honor and shame play a big role for example a young teacher in a village called us telling us that he observed that there are many people there watching our channel and some accepted Christ but they do not want to admit it or speak about their new faith." (Email received 12 May 2014.)

<sup>29</sup> Sara Afshari, "An examination of the Growth of Christianity and the Contribution of Farsi Christian Media in Contemporary Iran" August 2013. Unpublished MA thesis for Edinburgh University. In this essay Ms Afshari, the former head of programming at Sat 7 Pars, states that in 2011 64% of Iranians had access to satellite TV. Ms Afshari based this figure on the findings of a police report reported on the website [www.entekhab.ir](http://www.entekhab.ir) and another agency, Shargh News.

<sup>30</sup> <http://extremetracking.com/open;sum?login=farsinet> Accessed 31 March 2014.



### What the church planters say

A leader involved in house churches was asked how many Christians there were in his fellowships. I was expecting to hear the answer of around several hundred. This was not the case: it was a lot more than I had anticipated.<sup>31</sup> And the growth is happening quickly. About six months later the same leader was asked the same question, and by this time the number had grown a lot more.

This “a lot more” was also the answer given by two other church planters. It was also clear from their answers that the churches are not limited to just a few cities. One church planter talked of working in many towns. The reports regarding the number of house church Christians in Iran are not that helpful. But the answer to the central question, “Is house church Christianity growing in Iran?” is important. Eyewitness evidence declares that yes, there is *significant* growth.

### The arrests

Ironically, perhaps, the most important evidence regarding the spread of Christianity in Iran comes from the security forces

<sup>31</sup> For security reasons the exact figure cannot be given.

that harass the church. It is known that the MOIS has a full-time team dedicated to monitoring the activities of Christians.<sup>32</sup> This team taps phones, monitors people’s travelling, and infiltrates Christian groups. When – as has regularly happened in recent years – Christians are arrested, the security forces interrogate them for hours in order to get more information about the house churches. They also trawl through thousands of emails and files from the computers they have confiscated from Christians. There is no doubt that it is this team that has the most accurate information about the size of Iran’s new Christians. And, as we have seen, their view is that there are too many Christians to jail.

This is also the impression that sometimes appears on websites and in news outlets linked to the security forces. In evidence given to a UK tribunal in May 2008, Iran expert Dr Anna Enayat<sup>33</sup> referred to an official of the Ministry of Education, Hasan Mohmamadi, who in 2004 had complained to a group of high school students that “unfortunately, on average, every day 50 Iranian girls and boys convert secretly to Christian denominations in our country”. Dr Enayat, also made reference to the Deputy Director of Religious Propaganda and Applied Training of the Qom Seminaries. He said in 2005 that, “Christianity had become extremely active in academic circles. He referred to Christian missionaries establishing house churches in Tehran, and proselytising. He was concerned by the way in which the young were being attracted to Christianity, and said that statistics gave rise to grave concern. He said the religion appealed to youth, because it set no limits.”

The fact that the numbers of Iran’s new Christians had become a national issue for the Islamic Republic was confirmed

<sup>32</sup> An Iranian with knowledge about Iran’s security forces gave me this information.

<sup>33</sup> Dr Enayat is fluent in Persian and was previously a lecturer in Economic Sociology at Tehran University (1971–79). Ms Enayat has been a Senior Associate Member of St Antony’s College since 1983. She is a prolific writer on Iran, and for many years was on the editorial board of I.B. Tauris, a publisher of academic titles.



in October 2010 by the Supreme Leader. In a speech in Iran's religious capital, Qom, which was broadcast across the nation, Ayatollah Khamenei warned against the "network of house churches that threaten the Islamic faith and deceive young Muslims".<sup>34</sup> We can deduce from this that the reference to the house church networks gave them, albeit negatively, official recognition; the use of the word "threat" meant that their numbers were a serious concern.

Shortly after this speech there was a coordinated attempt by the government to crush the house church movement. Ironically it is this attack that has provided the most solid evidence that Christianity is spreading in Iran. From 2010 through to the summer of 2011 there were over 300 documented cases of Christians facing arbitrary arrest in over forty-eight towns and villages across Iran.<sup>35</sup> It is likely there are many other cases that have not been reported.

These figures prove two characteristics about the house church movement. First we are most certainly talking about a movement of thousands. The Christians arrested were active in their faith; they were the pastors and teachers responsible for others. During one of the arrests a scene with echoes of Gethsemane were re-enacted. In a city in the south the security forces entered the house of a Christian pastor who had two or three from his fellowship there. The police wanted to arrest all the Christians but the pastor said, "I am the leader, I am the one you need to talk to. You have no need to arrest my friends."<sup>36</sup> It is almost certain that some of the Christians arrested represented many others. Some would say, ten; others, a hundred. If the leader arrested was responsible for ten other Christians, then the figure for the arrests represents 3,000 believers; if a hundred,

<sup>34</sup> Sara Afshari, "An Examination of the Growth of Christianity", quoted from [www.aftabir.com](http://www.aftabir.com), p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> *Christians in Parliament All Party Parliamentary Group Report on the Persecution of Christians in Iran*, [http://www.biblesociety.org.uk/hosted\\_files/Inquiry\\_Report\\_A4.pdf](http://www.biblesociety.org.uk/hosted_files/Inquiry_Report_A4.pdf), section 5.3.

<sup>36</sup> An eyewitness from the fellowship told me this story.

then the figures point to a total of 30,000. It is also important to note that some of the house churches remained successfully below the radar and managed to escape the attention of the authorities.

The second characteristic of the house church movement that these arrests highlight is that it is a movement that is widespread across the country. Thirty years ago Christianity was almost entirely an urban affair. There were Protestant congregations in most of the largest cities – Tehran, Mashhad, Ispahan, Shiraz, Tabriz, Ahvaz, Kerman – but there were hardly any evangelical Christians who were of a Muslim background who lived in Iran's thousands of smaller towns and villages. Now – due primarily to satellite TV and the internet – there are. And the proof were these arrests of Christians in unfamiliar places like Defzul, a small town north of Ahvaz; or Arak, another small town 135 kilometres south west of Qom; or Bandar-E-Mahshahr, another small town just over 100 kilometres east of Abadan – and many more. In an interview regarding this, Pastor Edward Hovsepian Mehr, one of Iran's most senior church leaders, made exactly this point in connection to persecution:

**As the result of persecution, worship in the church is no longer contained or limited to a handful of churches in the mega cities; it has now moved, according to the statements by the state officials, to remote areas and villages.<sup>37</sup>**

These figures from TV and internet agencies, the demand for Scriptures, complaints about the numbers of Christians from officials, the numerous reports from those engaged in ministry to Iran the number, and the extent of the arrests of activists all combine to affirm that the estimates from Operation World regarding the size and growth rate of the church in Iran are probably reliable.

The church is probably 360,000-strong and is growing at

<sup>37</sup> Sara Afshari, "An Examination of the Growth of Christianity", p. 30.

a rate of 19.6 per cent a year. If this growth rate continues this means that by 2020 there will be (at least) 1,000,000 Christians who are of a Muslim background in Iran.<sup>38</sup>

This is not wishful thinking. This is not Christian hype. This is where the available evidence leads. There are too many Christians in Iran to jail.

As Jesus said, ‘The wind [Spirit] blows where it wills’ (John 3:8, RSV); in other words without divine intervention nobody can become a Christian, and certainly nobody can plant a church. However in Iran’s case it is also possible to see how recent events have helped that wind blow more freely over Iranian hearts.

To better understand the story of Iran’s new Christians, it is helpful to first see how recent history has impacted many Iranians’ receptivity to Jesus Christ.

38 Suggested growth rate might look like this: 2013: 360,000; 2014: 430,560; 2015: 514,949; 2016: 615,879; 2017: 736,591; 2018: 880,962; 2019: 1,053,630; 2020: 1,260,141.

## CHAPTER 2

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### IRANIANS AND THEIR NATIONAL RELIGION: A WOUNDED RELATIONSHIP

The story of Iran’s new Christians begins with the religion of their birth: Shia Islam. All of Iran’s new Christians were born into Shia Muslim families – some devout, some less so – but Shia Islam was their national religion. Even if they were not ardent believers, nearly all had an emotional attachment to the religion of their land, even if it was borne purely of patriotism.

By becoming Christian they renounced Islam. This was not a small step; it was an immense turnaround in their lives that required both determination and courage. They faced the risk of incurring the wrath of their families and employers, which could leave them without work and ostracized. They also risked facing the hostility of a government whose *raison d’être* was to uphold Shia Islam. And of much more importance was the spiritual risk. All their lives they had heard that only the followers of Islam go to heaven. Now they were burning that bridge. They were risking their souls being flung into the eternal flames.<sup>39</sup>

This has happened not for a small number of Iranians, but for several hundred thousand new Christians: they have renounced Islam.

Certainly there is a divine element in their story. The Holy Spirit has convinced them to turn from the religion of their

39 I have talked to hundreds of Iranians who have become Christians, and on a number of times I have heard how the fear of going to hell looms large when a Muslim considers turning to Christ.