

Working with Iranian students

An overview of the situation in Iran

We are living in a unique time when we are witnessing a response among Iranians both in Iran and outside of Iran that has never happened before in the history of the Persian-speaking world. What has brought this about in Iran?

1. **Disillusionment:** 25 years of the Islamic Revolution with its repressive atmosphere has created a vacuum that has drawn some to Christ.
2. **Identity:** In Iran there is a clash of two worlds – the world of Islam and also the world of Persian culture and history. An example of this is the Iranian New Year celebrations around 21 March which is not Islamic, but which continues to have a major impact on Iranian life. Surrounding nations tend to find their identity in Islam alone (e.g. the Arab World, Pakistan) but this is not true in Iran.
3. **God's sovereign power:** wonderful testimonies are surfacing from Iran where some have miraculously come to the Lord and then also have experienced his sovereign protection as believers. There has been some persecution, but it has not been widespread.
4. **The Church:** National believers are involved in ministry, and in addition to the more established Persian-speaking congregations meeting in buildings, other groups are meeting in homes around the country.
5. **The Media:** Radio and TV satellite broadcasts continue to have a major impact especially in view of the interest and thirst to know about Christianity. Literature, VCD's, videos and the Internet are being greatly used.

The Diaspora

What has been happening spiritually in Iran is also reflected in a similar spiritual movement among the 4-5 million Iranians scattered around the world.

1. **Asylum seekers/ Refugees in the UK:** Over the last few years, the UK has witnessed a large number of Iranian asylum seekers arriving here. Some of these are now mature students as well as second generation children who have now reached a student age. These two groups need to hear the Gospel and are generally disillusioned Muslims.
2. **Students directly from Iran:** These tend to be more religious as they have come here with official sponsorship from Iran and are generally planning to return to Iran. However, there have been conversions among them and Iranian culture usually makes it possible to share the faith with them in a way that may not be possible with other Muslim students groups.

Suggested Strategy

When working with Iranians, there are good cultural reasons for adopting a sensitive bold approach. The danger is over-caution which results in social contact only. Move forward as outlined below and push back the boundaries as far as it is possible.

- **Establish contact:** hospitality is important – build bridges and get to know them. This is very easy to do with Iranians as hospitality is an essential part of Persian culture and for them. It is a privilege for us to visit them.
- **Explain the Gospel as opportunities arise:** Focus on meeting “the hunger of the heart”
 - 1 Knowledge of God – concept of revelation – how the one true God reveals himself through Christ.
 - 2 Forgiveness of Sins – concept of atonement – how the one true God forgives us through Christ’s sacrifice.
 - 3 Assurance of Salvation – distinguish between law and grace as the basis of acceptance before God.
 - 4 Change of Heart – distinguish between outward reform and inward change.
 If they express an interest, help them to understand that there are many Iranians from Muslim background who have become Christians. Often Christianity is only associated with the Armenians and Assyrians in Iran.
- **Use resources:** as the friendship develops pass on literature etc. For example, the “Jesus” film, a Gospel or whole NT, preferably in Persian (Farsi). Best evangelistic book: “What is Christianity?” by William Miller. “Basic Christianity” by John Stott also available. The writings of retired Bishop of Iran, Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, such as “The Costliness of Love” which uses Persian poetry is an excellent tool. A good evangelistic video is “Great Questions of life” consisting of six 15 minute programmes. A full catalogue is available from Elam.
- **Invite to special Christian events** either on campus or in a local Church. Once a relationship exists, it is very likely that they will respond positively to such an invitation.
- **Arrange special low-key events** for the Iranian group, either for the wives or the families, especially at Christmas, Iranian new year and Easter and where possible, see if there is an appropriate Iranian Christian speaker available to help.
- **Maintain contact** with the students through email after their return to Iran.

Further help and information

Iranian Christian Fellowship 158, Sutton Court Road, Chiswick, London W4 3HR
 Telephone: 020 8995 4966
 Web: icfonline.co.uk (in Farsi)

Elam Ministries Grenville, Grenville Road, Shackleford Godalming GU8 6AX
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For more general information on approaching Muslims including students, and also how to share the Gospel message, see my “A Christian’s Evangelistic Pocket Guide to Islam” published by Christian Focus and available from Christian bookshops.

Malcolm Steer works with the Iranian Christian Fellowship that is in contact with a large number of Iranians who have come to Christ both in London and around the UK. These notes are based on a seminar given at the Friends International staff conference in January 2004.