

# West Asia Field

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## SVEN HAGEN JENSEN

Sven Hagen Jensen, M.Div. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, USA) has worked for the church for over 50 years as a pastor, editor, departmental director, and church administrator in Denmark, Nigeria and the Middle East. Jensen enjoys reading, writing, nature and gardening. He is married to Ingelis and has two adult children and four grandchildren.

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The Adventist mission work in Iran was officially organized as the Iran Mission and was part of the Central European Division in 1935 with headquarters located in Tehran. The Iran operated as a mission until 1957 when it was changed to Iran Section under the Middle East Division. Since 2017 the country of Iran is under the administration of the West Asia Field of the Middle East and North Africa Union.

Territory: Iran, Turkiye (formerly Turkey), and the northern portion of Cyprus (the southern portion of Cyprus is in the Trans-European Division).

Statistics (June 30, 2022): Churches, 6; membership, 637; population, 174,121,000<sup>1</sup>

## Organizational History

The Seventh-day Adventist church in Iran has had more than 100 years of organizational history. The Adventist work in Iran (Persia) was initially organized in 1911 under the Persian Mission when the first Seventh-day Adventist missionaries, Frank F. Oster and Henry Dirksen, entered the country of Persia. The mission territory at that time covered all of Persia and Afghanistan. At first, the two pioneers settled in Rezayeh (Urmia) in northwestern Persia.<sup>2</sup> Dirksen left after two years, and Oster remained for a while but later moved to Tabriz,<sup>3</sup> which was the Persian Mission headquarters until 1932.<sup>4</sup>

From 1911 to 1918 the Persian Mission was attached directly to the European Division with headquarters in Hamburg, Germany.<sup>5</sup> At the end of World War I, it temporarily became part of the African Near East Missions from 1919 to 1920, which was overseen by the British Union Conference executive committee.<sup>6</sup> In 1920, the Persian Mission returned to the European Division, whose headquarters were now in Skodsborg, Denmark, as it became part of the Levant Union Mission, whose headquarters were in Constantinople, Turkey.<sup>7</sup>

Over the next ten years, the Persian Mission experienced several organizational changes. In 1922 it once again became directly attached to the European Division.<sup>8</sup> Two years later in 1924, F. F. Oster was officially appointed director of the Mission, although he had been in practice its leader since 1911.<sup>9</sup> In 1928 the Persian Mission was transferred to the newly formed Central European Division,<sup>10</sup> and in 1932 was divided into the East Persian Mission with head office in Tehran and the West Persian Mission with head office in Tabriz, both attached

directly to the Central European Division.<sup>11</sup>

On the Nowruz (the Persian new year) of 1935 Reza Shah officially asked foreign delegates to use the Persian term *Iran* (meaning the land of Aryans) instead of Persia.<sup>12</sup> That same year there was another reorganization when the two separate Persian Missions were united again, now called the Iran Mission with head office at Naderi Avenue 20 in Tehran.<sup>13</sup>

Over the next three years the Iran Mission was administratively overseen by four entities. In 1937 it was given to the Central European Division Section Two,<sup>14</sup> after which it was attached directly to the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists,<sup>15</sup> then later became part of the Arab Union Mission,<sup>16</sup> and in 1941 part of the Middle East Union.<sup>17</sup> Here it remained for ten years until 1951 when it became part of the newly organized Middle East Division.<sup>18</sup> In 1957, after 22 years, Iran Mission became the Iran Section.

As the Adventist work in Iran continued to fluctuate over the next six decades, the organizational aspect also went through various changes, first functioning as the Iran Section from 1957 to 1971,<sup>19</sup> and thereafter as a field under various names and combinations with other countries starting from 1972 to current (2022). It has been managed by the Afro-Mideast Division, the Middle East Union attached to the General Conference, the Trans-European Division, the Trans-Mediterranean Union of the Euro-Africa Division,<sup>20</sup> and most recently part of the Middle East North Africa Union, first as the Iran Field then the Turkey-Iran Field,<sup>21</sup> and currently (2022) the West Asia Field.<sup>22</sup>

## Membership Statistics and Institutions

When the Iran Mission was organized in 1935, the *Adventist Yearbook* did not report the number of churches and membership. The first official statistics are from 1957, reporting eight churches and 226 members. By 1963 the membership in the eight churches had grown to 314.<sup>23</sup> After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the numbers rapidly decreased as some members immigrated to other countries. Although small, the church ran some important institutions, including the Sultanabad Mission Hospital,<sup>24</sup> Iran Adventist Academy (known also as Iran Training School),<sup>25</sup> Tehran Physiotherapy Clinic,<sup>26</sup> and Nourafshan Elementary School in Tehran.<sup>27</sup> In addition, there were some church schools around the country, which struggled at times with the government regulations.

## Influence of Missionaries

The Adventist mission work in Iran has had a long history of instability and for many years it was led by foreign missionaries who devoted their time and efforts to building up the work. One of them was F. F. Oster, who served with distinction for more than 25 years. Others led out for a few years (see the section "Leaders" below). It was not until 1981, 70 years since the Adventist work commenced in Iran, that the first national, Melcom Gasparian, became the leader. After him, several nationals served as presidents from 1981 to 2004 (Daniel

Manassian, Johnny Keshishzadeh, Hamzik Keshishzadeh, Rafik Keshishzadeh, and Johnny Manassian).

## Leaders

Frank F. Oster (1911-1937); H. E. Hargreaves (1939-1943); Charles C. Crider (1944-1949); K. S. Oster (1950-1951); R. C. Skinner (1952-1957); K. S. Oster, Acting (1958); R. C. Skinner (1959); Kenneth Harding (1960-1966); H. L. Gray (1967-1972); D. V. Kubrock (1974-1976); Paul Horton (1977-1978); Craig Newborn (1979-1980); Melcom Gasparian (1981); Daniel Manassian (1982-1989); Johnny Keshishzadeh (1990-1991); Hamzik Keshishzadeh (1992-1998); Rafik Keshishzadeh (1999-2002); Johnny Manassian (2003-2004); Daniello Barelli (2005); George S. Yousif (2006-2007); Johnny Keshishzadeh (2008-2009); Sima Sremac (2012); Hyo Su Jung (2014 -)

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## NOTES

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2. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (SDAE) (1996), s.v. "Iran Adventist Academy."
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16. Ibid. for 1943.
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22. Middle East and North Africa Union Administrative Committee, March 7, 2017, ADCOM-17-038, Folder 2016-2017, MENAU Archives.

23. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 1964.
  24. "Sanitariums and Hospitals," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 1935-1955.
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