



Group of medical workers who established the medical work in the City of Tabriz, c. 1926. L to R back row: Dr. Arsen Arzoo (Iranian); Almas Manassian (medical assistant); Dr. H. E. Hargreaves from England.

Photo courtesy Johnny Manassian.

Iran

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Johnny Manassian, Ed.D. (Loma Linda University) was born in Iran of Armenian descent. After graduating in 1960 from Middle East College in Beirut, Lebanon, he returned to Iran where he served as dean of men and principal for Adventist Academy and then as Iran Mission Education director. He later moved to Lebanon

and served as Youth, Education, and Global Missions director for the Middle East Union and professor of Bible and Education for Middle East College. He published a book, *Christianity with a Qur'anic View*. He has three adult children and five grandchildren.

Iran, officially the Islamic Republic of Iran, is a country in Western Asia.¹ It is bordered to the northwest by Armenia and Azerbaijan, to the north by the Caspian Sea, to the northeast by Turkmenistan, to the east by Afghanistan, to the southeast by Pakistan, to the south by the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, and to the west by Turkey and Iraq. It comprises 636,372 square miles (1,648,195 square kilometers) and has an estimated population (2021) of 85 million². It is the second-largest country in the Middle East, and its capital and largest city is Tehran.

The majority of the population is of Aryan descent and speaks the Farsi language. Approximately one fifth is of Turkish origin, and integrated in the population are groups of Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, and other minorities. Almost 99 percent of the people adhere to the Shiite branch of Islam, but Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian³ minorities can also be found.

Iran, known formerly as Persia, has had a long history. The Empire of the Medes and the Persians, founded in the sixth century B.C. by Cyrus the Great, extended at its height from the Indus River to the Aegean Sea. Persia appears in biblical history as the land of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes, who helped the Jews reestablish themselves after the Babylonian exile, and as the land of Esther and Ahasuerus (Xerxes). According to Isaiah 44:28-45:4, Cyrus served God's specific purposes and was called the Lord's "shepherd" and his "anointed." His policies on human rights and freedom of religion are reflected in his stele preserved in the British Museum. Persia was also the cradle of Zoroastrianism and its derivative Mithraism – the sun worship that competed with early Christianity in the Roman Empire. Despite numerous invasions by foreign armies throughout its history, Persia has always maintained its identity.

During the period of Arab conquest, Persia accepted Islam but retained its own language. In modern Persia, reaction to British and Russian influence resulted in nationalism and a constitutional government that began a program of modernization. The country is still mainly agricultural but has rich oil deposits. Since 1935, it has been known as Iran, its ancient Aryan name.

Origins of Adventist Work

Iran was first entered by Seventh-day Adventists in 1911, when Frank F. Oster and Henry Dirksen (both Americans) went there from Germany and settled in Rezayeh (Urmia) in northwestern Iran near the Turkish border. There they worked among the many Armenian and Nestorian Christians living in the area. In 1913, Dirksen left and Oster, having married Florence White, moved to Maragheh, a Kurdish town, where there were no Protestant missionaries and very few Christians.⁴ Sometime around 1914, the first converts—the Sperlings, a Russian musician and his wife—were baptized. Shortly after World War I broke out, Oster made a preaching tour

in the region.

During the war, when all Christians in the area had to flee from marauding Kurdish tribesmen, the Osters retired to Tabriz. By the time they left on furlough, there were two Sabbath-keeping families in Iran. Three years later, when the Osters returned to Tabriz, their teachings attracted much attention and led to the first baptism of nationals in Iran on May 26, 1923. On the same date, the first Seventh-day Adventist church in Iran was organized with 22 charter members. The Sabbath School organized earlier in the year had an average attendance of 130, and a Young People's Missionary Volunteer Society with 70 members. The next winter, two church schools were opened-- one for the Assyrian children and one for the Armenian children. Early in 1926, Oster reported that the enrollment in the school at Tabriz had approximately 120 students and that there were six other schools in the country.⁵ There were also 150 members in the northwestern part of Iran.

Development of the Adventist Work

Over the following years, the work was expanded to include medical missionary work, publishing work, education, and training of local pastors. There was also a greater focus on reaching out to other parts of the country and the majority population. So far, the Christian communities in the northwestern part of Iran had been targeted. In 1925, Dr. H. E. Hargreaves arrived from England to begin a missionary work. He was followed in 1926 by Dr. Arsen Arzoo, a Loma Linda graduate who began medical work at Julfa and later in Isfahan, in central Iran. Oscar Olson came and took charge of the educational work that was growing rapidly, the enrollment having increased to about 500 students, mostly orphans and children of the refugees.

There was a great need for Seventh-day Adventist publications in the national languages of the people. In Armenian there were only a few tracts, a collection of Bible readings and Ellen White's *Steps to Christ*; in Assyrian there were a few tracts, but reports mentioned no publications in Farsi, the language of the majority. In 1928, Dr. Arzoo moved to Sultanabad (now Arak), a predominantly Farsi-speaking community, and opened a dispensary in 1929. In 1935, the name changed to the Sultanabad Mission Hospital (*aka* Arak Mission Hospital) and was run by the Church for several more years with just a few interruptions.^{6 7}

The arrival of the Seventh-day Adventists was greatly welcomed in the Sultanabad community, and at the request of the leaders of the Muslim community, a school was opened in December 1929 with 35 students. By the close of the school year there were 50, and in 1931 there were 126, coming mostly from the Muslim families. In the 1930's, when the educational laws of the country were changed, the mission schools had to close. The schools in Iran were to serve a double role of educating the young people and of creating a reservoir of teachers who could be called upon as national evangelists. As of 1928, there were six such students. C. L. Gemmell, Education & M.V. secretary in Iran Mission, expressed his conviction on this point in an article in *Middle East Messenger* in 1952. He writes: "The greatest need of the church in Iran is trained workers, men and women who have studied in our schools, and who have caught the vision of earnest service for the Master."⁸

As time went on, the work in Iran was carried on in many languages among its many national groups. For example, a station at Resht that opened in 1932 required someone familiar with Syriac, Farsi, Turkish, and Russian. For many years, however, the work was limited to minority groups such as Armenians, Russians, and Assyrians. With the introduction of the Voice of Prophecy Bible Correspondence School in 1948, the entire population of Iran fell within the scope of the Seventh-day Adventist work for the first time. The correspondence school was very successful with an enrollment of 11,000 in 1953, of which 1,400 continued their lessons regularly. Courses were offered in Armenian, Farsi, and English. "Every day letters are received revealing the great spiritual lift which the Voice of Prophecy has brought."⁹

The production and sale of books in the Iran Mission opened a new era of the work in the country. Two books, *The Impending Conflict* and *Our Children*, had been translated into Farsi and printed. A colporteur institute was held in June 1955, where publishing department leaders from the Middle East Division were present to teach and train six young men from Tehran, Tabriz, and Arak. The sales in the first week were so successful that two others joined them. Within eight days of selling the books, half the total printing cost of the entire edition of *Our Children* was recovered and turned in to the Book and Periodical House in cash.¹⁰

The church leadership in Iran began to change its approach to meet the needs of the non-Christian peoples there. By 1956, the temperance film *One in Twenty Thousand* had been translated into Farsi, and the plan was to show it in all the schools of Iran.¹¹ Temperance work was also used successfully in conducting the Five-Day Plans to Stop Smoking. These were hosted at various venues around Iran and sometimes appeared on television programming.

In almost half a century, church members in Iran had not had the privilege of having an Adventist hymnal in their national language. A new and joyful milestone was reached when, in August 1957, a Farsi Adventist hymnal "Taraneem-e Roohanee" (Spiritual Songs) was introduced at an evangelistic meeting in the Pahlavi Avenue Adventist Church in Tehran.¹²

The Iran Training School (*aka* Iran Adventist Academy) was first opened in 1946 in rented quarters about fifteen kilometers north of Tehran and under the direction of Paul C. Boynton. Ups and downs in the educational field had brought many changes to the school. Political upheavals in the country forced the school to be conducted on a very limited basis for a while. Funds donated from a Thirteenth Sabbath Offering overflow¹³ made it possible to purchase a choice piece of property in Tehran where began construction of dormitories and other buildings. November 27, 1959, was a very special day because it was when a new administration building of the Iran Training School was dedicated. General Conference President R. R. Figuhr preached the dedication sermon.

¹⁴ In 1963, the school was able to offer a full high school curriculum authorized by the Ministry of Education.

On March 4, 1962, the up-to-date Tehran Physiotherapy Clinic opened in the remodeled Pahlavi Avenue building. One of the most valuable contributions that the clinic could make to the health and welfare of the Iranian capital was its provisions for the rehabilitation of those who had been crippled and paralyzed. Special

equipment had been obtained for that purpose. Kenneth Harding, president of the Iran Mission, early reported on both the physical and spiritual success of the clinic.¹⁵

It was in the 1960's that the membership in Iran reached its highest, when evangelism in the local congregations and new areas brought a good number of new converts into the Church. In 1961, there were eight churches or companies [Tehran (Farsi and Armenian), Tabriz, Julfa, Arak, Abadan, Shiraz and Rezayeh (Urmia)], five ordained and three licensed ministers. In 1962 alone, nearly 50 persons were added by baptism. This phenomenal growth (17 percent) peaked that same year with total membership reaching 314.

The new Nourafshan (Light-spreading) Elementary School to accommodate 300 boys and girls was dedicated in Tehran on April 24, 1969. It was located directly across the street from the Dutch Embassy in one of the finest sections of the city. Among other facilities, it had an auditorium-gymnasium that would seat 700 people. The plan was to use the building for evangelistic meetings, Five-Day Plans, and social and recreational activities.¹⁶

News reports over the years in *Middle East Messenger* tell of a high level of activity even with few members from small groups and congregations. Local Dorcas societies, J.M.V. work, Junior camps, Vacation Bible Schools and Ingathering campaigns were conducted in addition to personal and public evangelism. Every summer, a substantial number of church members would gather for 10 days on the Academy campus in the Elborz Mountains for an old-fashioned campmeeting held under a big tan tent. The church also offered their help after the earthquake of September 1, 1962, in the Red Mountains. With assistance from the World Church, they helped rebuild Ghazal Geshlog, one among many destroyed villages in the region. Again, reports of youth standing up for the Sabbath truth in the face of army service or educational challenges spoke of the faithfulness of the church in Iran.¹⁷

After 1979

The Islamic Revolution in 1979 caused major changes for the population of Iran in general as well as for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Islamic dress codes¹⁸ were introduced in public places for all and enforced by the morality police, the *Gast-e Ershad*.¹⁹ Some of the street names had to be changed due to the removal of the Shah from power. The Pahlavi Avenue, the location of the Field Office building, was renamed Vali-e-Asr Avenue. The foreign missionaries, pastors Newborn and Roth with their families, had to leave the country. This left the leadership of the Iran Field in the hands of the local people, of which Pastor Melcom Gasparian was the first national president. Both the Adventist Academy and the Nourafshan Elementary School in Tehran were taken over by the government.²⁰ To protect the homes connected with the Academy, the Church built a wall to separate the housing from the school buildings. The government, however, succeeded in putting a Muslim family in one of the homes with the intention to gradually replace the Adventist families as they moved to other locations. The membership drastically fell as time passed by, and many left Iran because of the restrictions, especially those for minority groups. For a period of 10 years only (1980 to 1990), the membership was reduced

to one-third its original size, with only a few members living outside Tehran.

The restrictions meant that no public efforts were possible and conversions from Islam to Christianity were strictly forbidden. However, the local pastors continued with the Sabbath services and Wednesday evening meetings in the Farsi-speaking church, where even some Muslims would attend. Personal evangelism continued. The Voice of Prophecy work had stopped, but the welfare work continued. The Field office compound had a beautiful park where newlywed couples would come from afar, with their photographer, to have their wedding photos taken for a small fee to the Field office.²¹

The worst earthquake ever (7.4 Richter) recorded in Iran²² struck the Manjil-Rudbar area in the Gilan Province about 200 kilometers north of Tehran on June 21, 1990. There were about 40,000 casualties and up to 100,000 injured. The ADRA Germany Director, Erich Lischek and Sven Jensen, representing ADRA Middle East,²³ travelled to Iran to evaluate the situation and offer its assistance together with other aid organizations. An ADRA office was opened in Tehran, and Zora Hacobian was appointed the local director to oversee a housing project in Rudbar for the homeless. As Pastor Hamzik Keshishzadeh later mentioned, "We have been restricted in openly preaching the gospel, but we have never held back, when it comes to serving the people of Iran through welfare work and disaster relief." This was a good opportunity to meet with the highest government officials and let them know about the work of the church.

In the early 1990's, radio programs in Farsi were produced for the Adventist World Radio and broadcast to the Farsi-speaking populations in Western Asia. The programming was about Health, Family, and Spiritual messages. From 2009, TV programs were produced for Hope Channel Persia and broadcast via satellite. The name of the channel was *Sedaye Omid (Voice of Hope)*. Since January 2020, the Farsi programs have only been broadcast on social media like YouTube, Instagram, etc.²⁴

Challenges and Possibilities

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Iran went through hard times and lost much of what was achieved by the work of missionaries, local workers, and members alike. Many had to leave, but others remained to hold the Church together and keep alive the faith among members. Schools and other properties were appropriated by the government. The Ministry of Counseling (Ershad) cautioned the leader not to allow Farsi-speaking people enter the church.²⁵ But the preaching of the gospel and the three angles' messages to the Iranians has not been a lost cause.

Properties and Land

The Association of the Adventist Church in Iran used to own six church buildings—one in Tabriz, one in Rezaye (Urmia), one in Arak, one in Isfahan, and two in Tehran in addition to a piece of land in Abadan. A heavy snowfall

in the mid-1990's caused the roof of the church in Arak to collapse. It was then arranged to sell the building. Also, the land in Abadan had already been sold. Throughout the years, the other church buildings have remained intact. Only recently (2020) the beautiful Armenian church building on Naderi Street was bulldozed and completely demolished. The church building on Vali-e Asr Avenue is still standing. Government policy states that if any church building should collapse, it will not be rebuilt.²⁶

Territory

The territory of Iran constitutes the Association of Adventist Church in Iran, part of the West Asia Field under the Middle East and North Africa Union, which is attached to the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists²⁷

Organizational Developments

The Seventh-day Adventist work in Iran was first organized as a mission of the European Division. For a time after World War I, it was part of the Levant Union and then was returned to the European Division. In 1928, it was assigned to the Central European Division and was later a part of its Section II. In 1932, it was divided into the East and West Persian Missions, then in 1935 reunited to form the Iran Mission with headquarters in Tehran. Later it became part of the Middle East Union and still later the Middle East Division upon its organization in 1951. Subsequently, operated under Afro-Mideast Division, Middle East Union under the General Conference, Trans-European Division, Trans-Mediterranean Union of the Euro-Africa Division, and most recently part of the Middle East North Africa Union, first as the Iran Field, then the Turkey-Iran Field²⁸ and latest the West Asia Field.²⁹ During its more than 100 years of organizational history, it has been known as a mission, a section, or a field.

Superintendents, Directors and Presidents

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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Oster, Kenneth. "Colporteur Beginnings in Iran." *Middle East Messenger*, 4, no. 3, Third Quarter, 1955.

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NOTES

1. The first part of this article relies to a great extent on the previous article written by Johnny Manassian on Iran, located in the 1996 *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Iran."
2. "Iran Population Growth Rate 1950-2021," Macrotrends, 2010-2021, accessed March 24, 2021, <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/IRN/iran/population-growth-rate>.
3. "Iran," *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, accessed June 28, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran#Religion>. An estimated 0.1566% are Christians according to the 2011 General Consensus. However, other unofficial estimates set the percentage much higher.
4. The new area where Oster worked was named the Persian Mission, covering the huge territories of Persia and Afghanistan, with its office in Hamburg, Germany. He worked as a licensed minister until 1920 when he took his furlough in the U.S.A. and was ordained.
5. "Our Work in Persia," *ARH*, April 22, 1926, 24.
6. Seventh-day Adventist Hospital, Iran, ca. 1935, Loma Linda University Photo Archives; Dept. of Archives and Special Collections, Loma Linda University, accessed March 24, 2021, <https://cdm.llu.edu/digital/collection/sdahpa/id/274/>. See also Mildred Thompson Olson, *Diamondola and Aram Middle East Ambassadors*, Tesar Printing C., Bridgman, Michigan (1992): 83-89. SDA doctor Wilhelm Heinrich Lesovsky (1901-1976) worked there a short time according to the following quote from his biography, "From 1951 to 1955 he worked again as a missionary, this time as a missionary doctor at the Adventist hospitals in Sultanabad, Persia (Iran), and in Baghdad, Iraq. The previously closed hospital was reopened through the intervention and presence of Lesovsky, who had a permit to practice medicine." Daniel Heinz and Chigemezi Nnadozie Wogu, "Lesovsky, Wilhelm Heinrich (1901-1976)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, accessed June 29, 2021, [https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=5H94.?](https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=5H94.)
7. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, "Sanitariums and Hospitals," accessed June 28, 2021, <https://www.adventistyearbook.org/?>
8. C. L. Gemmell, "The Need for Trained Workers," *Middle East Messenger*, 1, no. 3, Third Quarter, 1952, 7.?
9. "Here and There," *Middle East Messenger*, 2, no. 1, First Quarter, 1953, 8.
10. Kenneth Oster, "Colporteur Beginnings in Iran," *Middle East Messenger*, 4, no. 3, Third Quarter, 1955, 6.
11. "Here and There," *Middle East Messenger*, 5, no. 4, Fourth Quarter, 1956, 8.
12. Kenneth Oster, "Taraneem-e Roohanee," *Middle East Messenger*, 6, no. 4, Fourth Quarter, 1957, 4.

13. Kayla Ewert, email message to author, March 18, 2021, from GC Adventist Mission, with list of Thirteenth Sabbath Offerings for Iran. Iran Field has been the recipient of the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering overflow eight times (1938, 1943, 1944, 1945, 1952, 1955, 1957 and 1966) to support medical work, schools, and training of workers.
14. Kenneth Oster, "Dedication of Iran Training School Administration Building," *Middle East Messenger*, 8, no. 1, First Quarter, 1959, 1.
15. "Iran Clinic Meeting Success," *Middle East Messenger*, 11, no. 3, Third Quarter, 1962, 2.
16. "From Small Beginnings," *Middle East Messenger*, 18, no. 3, May-July 1969, 5.
17. *Middle East Messenger*, 1948-1949, 1952-1970.
18. Responses to Information Requests (RIRs), "Iran: The Enforcement of Dress Codes," Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (online), December 20, 2011, accessed June 28, 2021, <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2013/11/07/IRN103920.E.pdf>.
19. "Guidance Patrol," *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, last edited June 22, 2021, accessed July 1, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guidance_Patrol. In later years, the enforcement of the rules, at least in Tehran, has been somewhat less strict.
20. Rafik Keshishzadeh, email message to Sven Hagen Jensen, March 23, 2021. The government used them for free for over 30 years and later tried to rent the Academy, but it did not work out.
21. Hamzik Keshishzadeh, telephone interview by Sven Hagen Jensen, March 18, 2021. Hamzik was a former president of Iran Field (1992-1998).
22. "List of Earthquakes in Iran," *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, accessed June 28, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_earthquakes_in_Iran.
23. Sven Hagen Jensen, personal knowledge.
24. MediaMena, email message to Sven Hagen Jensen, March 18, 2021.
25. Rafik Keshishzadeh, email interview by Sven Hagen Jensen, March 23, 2021. Rafik was a former president of Iran Field (1999-2002).
26. Ibid.
27. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, "West Asia Field," accessed July 14, 2021, <https://www.adventistyearbook.org/entity?EntityID=13861>.
28. Middle East and North Africa Union Executive Committee, May 25, 2014, MENA-14-010, MENAU Archives.
29. Middle East and North Africa Union Administrative Committee, March 7, 2017, ADCOM-17-038, Folder 2016-2017, MENAU Archives.

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