

UNDERSTANDING IRAN

STUDY GUIDE

Adapted from The Thoughtful Christian study; “Understanding Iran”

INTRODUCTION

This week in our studies of places in conflict we turn our attention to Iran. This is a country that internally is in conflict and a country that much of the rest of the world is in conflict with. In this study we will look at what brought about the current state of Iran and the animosity that exists between the United States and Iran. We will also look at current conditions inside Iran, the political structure, the religion and the people. This will help us understand Iran better so that we can better respond to the situation in Iran and have a better understanding of the people and their situation.

In 1979, at the height of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, student activists took hostage the diplomats and other personnel serving in the American Embassy in Tehran and held them for 444 days. This crisis marked the end of diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran. Currently, relationships between the two countries are quite hostile. Iran is accused of working to develop nuclear weapons despite sanctions placed upon them by the United States, other Western countries, and the United Nations. The United States accuses Iran of supporting so-called terrorist groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestinian territories, and radical Shiite groups in Iraq. Occasionally, one hears that the U.S. government may take military action against Iran, either to knock out their nuclear capabilities or to destroy weapons that are purportedly destined for Iraq to supply insurgents there fighting against the U.S. military. It is in light of this background that most of us think of Iran. Usually we have a negative view of Iran and so its people. What we must realize is that Iran is a very complex country both culturally and politically/ If we are going to better understand Iran we need to look at the culture and politics.

A PAST WE FORGET (OR DON'T KNOW ABOUT)

Why doesn't the U.S. want to have diplomatic relationships with Iran, democratic or not? Well, there's a history behind that question. For nearly 200 years before the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1978-79), Iran was susceptible to outside forces who tried to control the economic and political interests of the country. For much of that time it was the Russians and the British vying for influence in Iran. Despite this, Iran has had democratic impulses going back at least a hundred years. The first time was 1906-11 when a constitutional movement attempted to put in place a parliamentary form of government. But it was ultimately squashed by a combination of internal forces, including royalists, and external forces—notably the Russians and British who realized it was easier to control one person, namely the king, than a body such as a parliament. The second stab at democracy came in the years immediately after World War II, but that movement too was squashed.

In the thirty-some years after World War II, it was increasingly the U.S. who was engaged in Iran. And there are some inconvenient truths about the relationship between the U.S. and Iran that many Americans don't know and others would like to ignore. First among them is the fact that in 1953 a CIA-sponsored coup brought down the government of Prime Minister Mossadeq, who was the democratically elected leader of the country at the time. Mossadeq's "crime" was to nationalize Iran's greatest natural resource—petroleum—in response to foreign oil companies who were taking advantage of Iran's national treasure. The Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, a British oil consortium that later became British Petroleum (BP), was paying Iran less money for their oil than it was paying British tax on the oil. Iranians at first had hoped that the U.S. would come to their support in their struggle against the British, but the CIA instead cooperated in a coup that deposed Mossadeq and helped put the Shah (king) of Iran back into power.

For 25 years thereafter the U.S. supported the Shah, who ruled with a brutal and iron fist, suppressing or killing his opponents. Indeed, his notorious secret police, SAVAK, was most likely financed and trained by the U.S., with assistance from Israeli intelligence forces. But in politics, as in physics, every action has an equal and opposite reaction. The Iranian reaction to the American support for the Shah was the formation of a loose coalition of very different and unlikely allies. On one side were religious radicals who were opposed to any Western influence, in part on religious and cultural grounds, but also because of the U.S. support of Israel and supposed opposition to Islam. Their inspiration came from the Ayatollah Khomeini, who because of his opposition to the Shah lived in exile from 1964 to 1979. The clerics who opposed the Shah were in large measure also backed by the merchants who had shops in

the bazaars throughout Iran, in part because the Shah's economic policies were detrimental to them. The other part of the resistance to the American-backed Shah came from leftists, Marxists, journalists, intellectuals, and students. During the Cold War, the mere presence of Marxists in Iran gave the U.S. reason for supporting the Shah against his opposition.

The resistance to the Shah reached a crescendo in 1978. In response to some anti-Shah rallies in 1978, the Shah's henchmen killed many of the protesters. It did not help that when opposition to the Shah was building, President Carter showed up in Tehran for a state dinner with the Shah. Carter deserves credit for pressing the Shah to improve human rights in Iran, but after his meeting with the Shah, Carter publicly reaffirmed American support for the Shah. For some opponents of the Shah, this was the straw that broke the camel's back. The Shah soon went into exile, eventually entering the U.S. for medical attention. Meanwhile, Khomeini returned to Iran. In less than a year Americans were taken hostage at the American embassy in Tehran. The U.S. broke off relationships with Iran, and relationships between these two countries have been hostile for the most part ever since.

To this day Iranians ask the "What if" question: What if Mossadeq—who was legitimately elected—had been allowed to stay in office? Where would Iran be today? What would their relationship be with the West? Would their economy be more robust than it is today? Would they have a viable democratic government?

Americans also conveniently forget that the U.S. supported Saddam Hussein in Iraq's eight-year war with Iran. Sensing an opportunity to take advantage of Iran during a time of flux, Iraq invaded Iran in 1980. Thanks to the U.S. support for Saddam, Iraq had superior weaponry, despite the fact the Reagan administration clandestinely sold some missiles to Iran through what became known as the Iran-Contra affair. Though deficient in military equipment—much of what was leftover from the years of U.S. support for the Shah was badly in need of upgrading and repair—Iran had plenty of human bodies to conscript for the war. Many who were recruited for the war effort were mere boys. About a half million Iranians died as a result of this war with Iraq. Those who gave their lives in the fight against Iraq are considered martyrs for a just cause, and all over the cities in Iran there are large murals on the sides of buildings of young Iranian men who lost their lives in this effort. Iranians don't forget that the U.S. supported Iraq in this effort, nor that Saddam used chemical and biological weapons against their people. To make matters worse, the U.S. shot down an Iranian passenger plane in 1988 over the Strait of Hormuz, killing all 290 passengers and crew aboard.

Despite this sorry history between our countries and despite the official anti-American rhetoric from the Iran government, there is not that much anti-Americanism on the part of the people. They don't want American intrusion like the years when the Shah was in power, but they would also like their country to be open to Western ideas and commerce and to be in relationship with the U.S. At the very least, they would like to be treated with dignity and respect. The pro-American sentiments in Iran are even more remarkable given the fact that many of the people most opposed to the Islamic Revolution already migrated to Western countries.

A COMPLEX COUNTRY – COMPLEX GOVERNMENT

The country is a complex place, as complex as a Persian rug. It is also a place of contradictions, the place where they grow sweet lemons and sour oranges, both of which are an acquired taste. Iran has a parliament and elections, but all candidates are vetted by a council controlled by the Islamic clerics who dominate the affairs of the country, and even the laws passed by Parliament have to be approved by this council. Women have second-class status, yet currently 65 percent of university graduates are women, to the consternation of the cleric-dominated government. While Iran has the third largest supply of oil in the world, it is also purportedly developing a nuclear energy program, to the consternation of Western governments. Everywhere we went in public places, Iran is using energy-conserving compact fluorescent light bulbs, yet they continue to burn leaded fuel and use pollution-spewing old cars without emissions controls. Cities like Tehran have a major pollution problem. It was not uncommon to see locals wearing facemasks in Tehran. Yes, Iran is a place of contradictions and contrasts.

Iran is a complex country, including the current government structure. The Iranian government is part theocratic system run by the clerics of Iran, part democratic system elected by the people. The president and the parliament are elected by the people. But their power is muted by two facts: the president isn't the head of state: that role belongs to the Supreme Leader, now the Ayatollah Khamenei, successor to the Ayatollah Khomeini. Furthermore, all the candidates who run for the presidency and parliament are vetted by the Guardian Council, and bills passed by parliament are also subject to the approval of the Guardian Council. Half the members of the Guardian Council are theologians appointed by the Supreme Leader and the other half are jurists appointed by the judiciary, and—get this—the head of the judiciary is appointed by the Supreme Leader and reports to him. The Supreme Leader is appointed by a panel called the Assembly of Experts, all clerics, and candidates for this group are vetted by the Guardian Council. If all this seems rather ingrown, well, it is.

One assumption many have in the West is that the Supreme Leader is a dictator, and the president is his instrument. But in reality, power is not as concentrated with the few as many think. And that is part of the problem. Since power is diffused through a number of persons and bodies in the government, no one takes responsibility for anything. Someone else can always be blamed for the shortcomings of the government or the economy. People in the government can tend to ignore the Supreme Leader's dictates, like when he ordered his deputies nearly two years ago to privatize some government-run companies—they ignored both his orders despite a public scolding he gave them.

Most people in Iran were baffled by President Bush's 2002 State of the Union speech in which he lumped Iran in with Iraq and North Korea as the "axis of evil." The "axis" reference was an allusion to the totalitarian Axis powers during World War II—Germany, Italy, and Japan. But North Korea, Iran, and Iraq do not have an alliance as the Axis Powers did in World War II. Iraq was Iran's mortal enemy, and it was an embarrassment to the proud Iranian people to be lumped in with the quixotic North Koreans. Besides, Bush's "axis of evil" speech came soon after 9/11, when the Iranians had been helpful to the U.S. in battling the Taliban in Afghanistan. It also was at a time when Mohammad Khatami was president of Iran. Khatami was a reform-minded leader who was more open to the West, and was trying to improve human rights within Iran itself, especially for women. But when Bush painted Iran with the same broad stroke as Iraq and North Korea, the typical Iranian response was to say, "If this is what we get from the U.S. when we have a reform-minded president, then perhaps what we need is a more aggressive kind of nationalistic leader." And they voted in the radical Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at the next election. (There were other reasons, however, for Ahmadinejad's election, including the fact he ran on a campaign of reform and economic improvement—pledges he's not made good on.)

ISLAM IN IRAN

If it's true that we don't know much about Islam, we know even less about Shia Islam. Nearly all of the Western textbooks introduce Islam through the Sunni perspective, because Western Orientalists first learned Islam from the Ottoman Empire, which was Sunni, and later from Egypt, which is also Sunni. Westerners are taught, for instance, about the Five Pillars of Islam: the Oneness of God and the finality of the prophethood of Muhammad, saying the daily prayers, almsgiving to the needy, fasting during Ramadan (called Ramazan in Iran), and a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca for those who are able. But for the Shia, there may be five, six, or even ten pillars.

What distinguishes the Shia is who they accept as the legitimate successors to Muhammad and what role they play in Islam. The Shia believe that the rightful heir of Muhammad was Ali, the Prophet's cousin who was married to Muhammad's daughter, Fatima. The Sunnis instead accept the Caliphs as Muhammad's successors, who were actually political and military rulers. Additionally, the Shiites believe there were 12 spiritual leaders or Imams following Muhammad, the first of which was Ali. The 12th of these Imams is called the "Mahdi." He disappeared and is in hiding, and the Shia expect him to return again, along with Jesus, to establish justice and peace throughout the world.

The Shia pray the same daily prayers as the Sunni, but they are freer in the way they say them. They may pray just three times a day instead of five, saying the noon and afternoon prayers together and the sundown and night time prayers together. The Shia also add a reference to Ali in their call to prayer, which is a source of irritation to the Sunnis. Sunnis and Shia also have different understandings about the justice of God: Sunnis believe that God can make laws arbitrarily, Shia do not. That would go against reason, they say. This results in Shia being more concerned about justice on a human plane, too, justice understood as setting wrongs right.

Saying prayers in the mosque is not important to many Muslims in Iran. One teacher told us he rarely goes to mosque himself, yet he prays three times a day—in his office or home, wherever he is. Many devout Muslims belong to what we called religious societies that are organized around a common cause: to read and study the Qur'an together or to participate in some kind of social service. Some of these religious societies bring in clerics to preach for them, and some of them have their own buildings.

In Iran, the line between religion and politics is blurred. One example is that on Friday, their holy day, two sermons are given in all the mosques throughout the country. One sermon is on the state of the country, the other is on international affairs. And what is said on either subject every Friday throughout the country is handed down from the Supreme Leader, the Ayatollah Khamenei. An American expatriate living in Iran tells us that a way to discern how loyal Iranians are to the government is whether or not they attend these Friday sermons in the mosque.

RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN IRAN

Archbishop Sarkissian of the Armenian Orthodox Church in Iran, says that whether groups in Iran have religious freedom depends on what is meant by freedom. It also depends on which group you're talking about. The Armenian Orthodox Church doesn't pose much of a threat to the government because it is a "national church." One must be born into their church, in other words, and by nature the Orthodox do not evangelize or proselytize. They use their own language, thus they're not much of a threat to the Farsi-speaking population. Still, the Armenian Orthodox are losing their people to immigration. While there are still about 100,000 of them, each year 2,000 to 3,000 emigrate elsewhere, thanks in part to the intervention of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, a Zionist organization that is also encouraging Christians to leave the country. The archbishop says this group is decimating his people.

The situation is even more difficult for the Armenian Evangelical Church, which is really Presbyterian, but they don't use that word because it is associated with the West. They have one central church in Tehran, plus two house churches. Their pastor left the country for the United States, and his predecessor was killed in the 1990s, apparently because he was too critical of the government. One leader from this group says that their church's biggest challenge is to maintain a sense of hope. When I asked her what gives her hope for the future, there was a long pause, then she said she was probably the wrong person to ask. We also heard reports that things are much more difficult for Farsi-speaking Christian churches, especially the more evangelical or Pentecostal groups that try to evangelize.

The Jewish community is also under duress. Ironically, the Jewish Synagogue in Esfahan. (There is evidence of Jewish presence in Esfahan going back more than 2,500 years.) is located on Palestinian Square, across from a mosque and a bank, just down the street from a Christian church. At one time there were 25 synagogues in the city; now they're down to 10. On a typical Friday 300 people attend Shabbat services, but there are no more rabbis left in the country. Once in awhile they get a visiting rabbi from Israel or the U.S., but synagogue leadership is totally in the hands of the laity.

The official stance of the Iranian government is that freedom is granted to religious minorities. What this means is that recognized minority religions—Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity—have representation in the parliament. Within their own communities they are also allowed to practice their religion as they see fit, but they aren't allowed to proselytize.

However, adherents to the Baha'i religion are not only denied religious freedom, they have been widely known to be subjected to persecution. As recently as May 2008 Baha'is based in the United States and the U.S. State Department accused the Iranian government of imprisoning six prominent Baha'is. Iran recognizes only revealed religions, and Baha'i is not a revealed religion. Besides, Iranian government officials also claim that Baha'i was the creation of the British in the nineteenth century in an attempt to undermine Islam and self-rule. In fact, Baha'i was a breakaway group from Shia Islam in the nineteenth century, and therefore they are considered apostate. The Baha'is believe in the unity of all humankind and of all religions. The Baha'is tended to be successful in the pre-Islamic Revolution era ruled by the Shah of Iran. They were accused by some as being members of SAVAK, the Shah's secret police. They also tried to win others to their religious outlook. For these reasons, they became a target for persecution during and after the Islamic Revolution, and apparently continue to be such today.

CONCLUSIONS

Iran is a very complex country, not only politically but on many levels from society to culture and history. The United States cannot claim to be blameless in the bad relationships between the countries and any ill-will that is felt towards our country. The question is how can we start to get along together? Is our lack of dialog helping or harming our relationships? All these things we have to consider as we move forward.

There is not only the political conflict but there is conflict between the two major religions of our countries and there must be a continuing dialog between Islam and Christianity. Consider how many of the hot spots in the world involve hostile relationships between two or more of the Abrahamic faiths. Not only is world peace at stake. Mohammad Ali Shomali an Islamic professor says, "What a witness it would be to the rest of the world if the Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—could get along with each other." He goes on to talk about Christian-Muslim relationships and the Catholic-Muslim dialogue in England in which he is engaged. On a sabbatical, he had specifically studied Christianity in England, not "looking for our rivals, but our long lost cousins," he said. He also admonished us that there is no way to show respect for Muslims without showing respect for Islam. (Wouldn't we say the same thing to non-Christians—that they don't respect us unless they have respect for our Christian faith?) He emphasized that

Christians and Muslims should work together on mutual concerns such as the environment, peace, and the meeting of human need. What about Christians supporting a mosque, or Muslims a church? he wondered.

Indeed, there is work that Christians and Muslims can do together. But we Christians also have our own work cut out for us, some of which is theological work. Islam has a place for Jesus in the Qur'an—Muslims believe Jesus is a great prophet—yet Christians have no similar place for Islam in their Scriptures or theology. This causes a problem for Muslims. But the place that Muslims have for Jesus—son of Mary but not Son of God—is obviously not the same place Christians have for him. This causes a problem for Christians. This theological conundrum should keep us busy for awhile. But it is necessary and important work. And like the young woman in Esfahan said, “It’s going to take a long time,” so we should get on with it right away.

I hope this short look at Iran has given you a better understanding of the complex issues that we face in dealing with Iran. It should be realized that Iranians as a people do not hold the same animosities to Americans that we see coming from their government. They are all children of God and we should treat them as such. One way that we can help is to reach to Iranians we know at work, school and neighborhoods and show them our Christian love. This word will get back and give the message Jesus wants us to spread.