



# Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailed analysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.



Iran



Population: 80.84 millions (#19 out of countries)

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## Geography

**Area:** 1,648,195 square km. Bridging Central Asia with the Middle East, Iran borders Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia, the Caspian Sea, the Gulf of Oman, and the Persian Gulf. Desert and arid to semi-arid mountains dominate most areas. Notable deserts include the Kavir in north central Iran and the Lut in the east. The Alborz Mountains border the Caspian Sea, whereas the Zagros Mountains occupy south central areas. Temperate climate occurs in forested mountainous areas of the northwest and a narrow stretch of plains along the Caspian Sea. Located in the extreme northwest, Lake Urmia is one of the largest lakes in the Middle East. Water is sparse in many areas. The largest river is the Karun, which originates in the Zagros Mountains and empties into the Persian Gulf. Droughts, floods, dust storms, sandstorms, and earthquakes are natural hazards. Environmental issues include air, water, industrial, and soil pollution and desertification, deforestation, overgrazing, soil degradation, inadequate fresh water, and urbanization. Iran is divided in thirty-one administrative provinces.

## Peoples

Persian: 51%

Azeri: 24%

Gilaki and Mazandarani: 8%

Kurd: 7%

Arab: 3%

Lur: 2%

Baloch: 2%

Turkmen: 2%

Other: 1%

Persians populate the interior, Persian Gulf regions, and much of the central north and northeast. Azeris reside in the interior northeast and constitute nearly one quarter of the national population; more Azeris live in Iran than in Azerbaijan. Kurds live along much of the Iraqi border. Gilaki, Mazandarani, and Turkmen are concentrated on the Caspian coast. Arabs populate several areas along the Persian Gulf. Lur reside in two large regions in the Zagros Mountains. Baloch form the majority in the southeast near Pakistan. In 2017, there were 2.5-3.0 million Afghan refugees.

**Population:** 82,021,564 (July 2017)

**Annual Growth Rate:** 1.24% (2017)

**Fertility Rate:** 1.97 children born per woman (2017)

**Life Expectancy:** 72.7 male, 75.5 female (2017)

**Languages:** Iranian Persian [Western Farsi] (62%), Azerbaijani (14%), Kurdish languages (7%), Luri (3%), Mazandarani (3%), Arabic (3%), Gilaki (3%), other (5%). Seventy-eight indigenous languages are spoken in Iran. Languages with over one million speakers include Iranian Persian (49.6 million), Azerbaijani (10.9 million), Kurdish dialects (5.59 million), Arabic dialects (2.86 million), Gilaki (2.4 million), Luri dialects (2.4 million), Mazandarani (2.34 million), Balochi dialects (1.92 million), Bakhtiâri (1.0 million), and Laki (1.0 million). Written education occurs almost exclusively in Persian. Azeris and most other minority language speakers have no formal education in reading and writing their language, resulting in a non-standardized dialectal continuum that makes communication difficult with Azerbaijani and Turkic Azeris.

**Literacy:** 86.8% (2015)

## History

Formerly known as Persia, some of the longest inhabited cities in the world, which date back several millennia BC, are found in Iran. The Medes and Persians unified into the Achaemenid (Persian) Empire by the sixth century BC, which at its height ruled from Egypt to Southeastern Europe on the east and to Afghanistan on the west. In the Bible, the Persians played an important role returning the Jewish people to their homeland to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. Alexander the Great conquered the Achaemenid Empire in the fourth century BC, and Persian rule was reestablished the following century. The Parthian Empire emerged in the third century BC and ruled until the third century AD, holding off Roman advances in the region for several hundred years. The Sassanid Empire ruled until the seventh century when Islam overran Iran and displaced the previously dominant Zoroastrian religion. Despite the introduction of Islam by Arabs, Persians maintained their separate culture and identity. The Mongols and Seljuk Turks invaded after 1200 AD. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, a cultural revival occurred under the Safavid Dynasty, and Uzbeks and Ottomans were expelled. The Qajar dynasty began in 1725 and endured until 1925, followed by the Pahlavi dynasty from 1925 to 1979. European colonialism never occurred in Persia; however, wars were fought with Russia and the British. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi came to power in 1941 as Shah and economic reforms and stronger ties with the West led to economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s. In the late 1970s, disparate political groups opposed the Shah and instigated revolution. In 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was pronounced "Supreme Leader" and took power through the establishment of a theocratic government as the Shah fled into exile.<sup>[1]</sup> Ties with the United States were severely strained when American hostages were held in the American embassy for over one year. A long, bloody war with Iraq was fought from 1980 to 1988 and resulted with mass casualties to both sides. Iran has supported terrorist groups for several decades and has been labeled a country that sponsors terrorism by the United States. In 2009, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was reelected in what many Western observers considered a nonrepresentative election, leading to mass protests in Tehran. The West continues to view Iran with suspicion and concern in regards to its belligerent attitude toward Israel, interest in acquiring nuclear capabilities, and involvement with terrorist organizations. The United States has no formal diplomatic relations with Iran. In 2015, Iran and several Western powers agreed for Iran to restrict its nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief.

## Culture

Persian culture greatly influenced Europe in ancient and Medieval times through technological advances in agriculture and science. Zoroastrianism, a monotheistic religion that stresses purification, free will, and resurrection of the dead, originated in Iran prior to the sixth century BC and was the dominant religion of Iran until the Islamic conquest. Zoroastrianism has few followers today, primary in Iran and the Middle East. Carpets, gardens, sports, and games from Iran have influenced many other nations for millennia. Today, Islam is one of the greatest cultural forces, influencing customs regarding all areas of life. Mothers play an active role in family life. Parents are extensively involved in arranging and coordinating the marriage of their children. In recent years, Iran has experienced a dramatic decrease in birth rates towards Western levels as women have become better educated. Polygamy is uncommon. Although adultery is a capital offense in Iran, moral conduct is less conservative than many in the West believe. Shi'a Islam allows temporary mut'ah "pleasure marriages" for specified periods.<sup>[2]</sup> which are used by many young Shiites as theological license for sexual relationships with multiple successive partners without lasting commitment.<sup>[3]</sup> Cigarette consumption rates compare to the worldwide average, whereas alcohol consumption rates are very low.

## Economy

**GDP per capita:** \$20,200 (2017) [33.9% of U.S.]

**Human Development Index:** 0.798

**Corruption Index:** 30 (2017)

With abundant oil reserves, diverse natural resources, and a strategic geographic location, Iran suffers from an inefficient economy weighed down by UN sanctions and overreliance on oil export profits. The economy is highly sensitive to oil prices and demand. In 2017, the unemployment rate was 12.4%, with many more underemployed. Nineteen percent (19%) of Iranians live below the poverty line. Due to limited job prospects, many educated Iranians immigrate to other nations for employment. Natural resources include oil, natural gas, chromium, coal, copper, iron ore, and many other valuable metals. Services employ 48.6% of the workforce and generate 54.3% of the GDP, whereas industry employs 35.1% of the workforce and accounts for 35.9% of the GDP. Primary industries include oil, chemicals, fertilizers, textiles, cement, metals, and food processing. Wheat, rice, sugar beets, sugar cane, fruit, and nuts are major crops. Caviar is produced along the Caspian coast. Approximately 16% of the workforce labors in agriculture, which generates 9.8% of the GDP. Primary trade partners include the United Arab Emirates, China, South Korea, and India.

Iran is perceived as one of the most corrupt nations worldwide. Human trafficking for forced servitude and sexual exploitation is well organized. Offenders are not regularly prosecuted, and the government does little to protect victims. Iran is a major trafficker for Southwest Asian heroin to the Middle East and Europe and has one of the highest rates of users worldwide despite government efforts to counter illicit drug use and activity. The government has repeatedly been charged with corruption regarding elections and offenses targeting some political groups.

## Faiths

Muslim: 99.4%

Other: 0.3%

Unspecified: 0.4%

## Christians

### Denominations Members Congregations

Armenian Apostolic – 110,000-300,000

Evangelicals – 117,678

Roman Catholic – 21,380

Assyrian and Chaldean – 7,000

Latter-day Saints – less than 50 – 0

Seventh Day Adventists – 0

## Religion

Nearly all Iranians are Muslim; 90-95% are Shi'a Muslims and 5-10% are Sunni Muslims. Baha'i is among the largest non-Muslim groups with an estimated 300,000 adherents. The size of the Christian population is disputed. Government figures report 117,700 Christians, whereas other figures estimate the number of Christians as high as one million. Most Christians are Armenians. Protestant Christians number around 10,000 although some estimates are as high as nearly 120,000. The Assyrian Christian population is estimated between 10,000 and 20,000. Zoroastrians number approximately 25,000. There are approximately 9,000-20,000 Jews.[\[4\]](#) Religious minority groups report higher rates of emigration, but it is unclear whether this is economically or religiously motivated due to low levels of religious freedom and poor economic conditions.[\[5\]](#)

## Religious Freedom

## Persecution Index: 10th (2018)

The constitution declares Shi'a Islam as the state religion and states that other Muslim groups and pre-Islamic religious groups, such as Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians, are protected or treated with full respect. However, the government has severely limited religious freedom. The constitution mandates that laws must be derived from Islam. In recent years, the government has taken an increasingly less tolerant attitude toward non-Shi'a Muslim groups. Religious groups that have received the greatest harassment, violence, and persecution include Baha'is, Evangelical Christians, Sufi Muslims, and Jews. There have been many recent reports of religious minorities being discriminated against, imprisoned, harassed, and intimidated by the government. Non-Muslims are forbidden to publicly disseminate religious material or to proselyte Muslims. Apostasy from Islam is a crime for Muslims and in the past has been punished by death, although no recent executions have occurred. Baha'is have faced the most extreme persecution from government authorities, many of whom deem the religious group as a political entity attempting to disunite Iran and Muslims. Ethnic minority groups must have their religious materials in their respective languages approved by government officials. Minority religious groups frequently report that they are under close government surveillance and have had religious materials confiscated.<sup>[6]</sup>

## Largest Cities

Urban: 74.9%

Tehran, Meshed, Isfahan, Karaj, Shiraz, Tabriz, Qom, Ahvaz, Kermānshāh, Urmia, Rasht, Z̄hedān, Hamadān, Kermān, Yazd, Ardabāī, Bandar Abbas, Ar̄k, Esfāms̄hahr, Zanjān, Sanandaj, Qazvān, Khorām ābād, Gorgān, S̄r̄, Shahr̄r, Qods, K̄shān, Mal̄rd, Dezfāī, Nishapur, B̄bol, Khomeynī Shahr, Sabzev̄r, Golestān, āmol, P̄kdasht, Najaf ābād, Bor̄jerd, ābādān, Qarchak, Bojn̄rd, Varāmān, B̄shehr, S̄veh, Q̄'em Shahr, B̄rjand, Nas̄m Shahr, S̄rjān, Khoy, āl̄m, B̄k̄n, Shahr-e Kord, Semnān, Fardās, Mar̄gheh, Sh̄hān Shahr, Mal̄yer, Mah̄bād, Saqqez, Bandar-e M̄hshahr, Rafsanjān, Gonbad-e Qabus, Sh̄hr̄d, Marvdasht, Kamāl Shahr, Jahrom, Torbat-e āydar̄eh, Mar̄vān, And̄meshk, Shahreza, Z̄bol, Ȳs̄j, Miandoab, Khoramshahr, Marand, J̄roft, Bam, Behbahān, Dorud, Na'ār̄bād, Mo'amadshahr, āzeh, Bandar-e Anzal̄, And̄sheh, ār̄nshahr, Fas̄, Bor̄zjān, B̄neh, Ch̄bahār, Rob̄ Kar̄m, K̄shmar, Sh̄shtar, Q̄chān, L̄h̄jān, Ahar, Masjed-e Soleymān, Torbat-e J̄m.

Cities listed in **bold** have no LDS congregations.

None of the ninety-eight cities with over 100,000 inhabitants have an LDS congregation. Fifty-three percent (53%) of the national population resides in the ninety-eight largest cities.

## LDS History

The first LDS congregation was established in Tehran in the 1950s.<sup>[7]</sup> American Latter-day Saints also meet in the privacy of their homes outside Tehran for Sunday services in the 1970s.<sup>[8]</sup> By the end of 1974, there were 182 LDS members in Iran, including eighty in the Tehran Branch. Most members at this time were Americans on government assignment but there were a few Iranian members.<sup>[9]</sup> In 1975, the Church organized the Iran Tehran Mission. Eighteen missionaries learned Farsi and participated in humanitarian and development work, such as teaching English and assisting Boy Scout programs, but did not openly proselyte. Missionaries received some referrals to teach investigators but had no LDS scriptures in Farsi at the time. Branches or groups operated in Tehran, Shiraz, Isfahan, Ahwaz, and Charchesmeh. There were 420 members in Iran in 1977. Approximately fifteen Iranians joined the Church prior to the discontinuance of the mission in early 1979 as a result of the Iranian Revolution. Several non-Iranian converts were also baptized during this period. The last sacrament meeting was held in May 1979.<sup>[10]</sup>

In 2000, Iran became part of the Europe Central Area.<sup>[11]</sup> In 2008, Iran became part of the newly created Middle East/Africa North Area. In 2010, Iranian Latter-day Saints worshiped in many areas outside their home country, particularly in the United States, South America, Asia, and Europe. Iranians have been uniquely receptive to the LDS gospel message among peoples native to the Middle East and Southwestern Asia. The Church published its translation of the entire Book of Mormon into Farsi in 2015. By 2018, there appeared to be hundreds, if not as many as one thousand, active Iranian Latter-day Saints who lived in North America, Europe, and Oceania. The Church organized its first Farsi-speaking branch in the United States in late 2017 in Del Mar, California. At the time, the branch appeared to be entirely led by Iranian members.

## Membership Growth

**LDS Membership: less than 50 (2018)**

Any LDS members in Iran consist of Iranian converts baptized abroad who have returned to their home country or early Iranian Latter-day Saints who remained in the country following the revolution.

## **Congregational Growth**

**Wards: 0 Branches: 0 (2018)**

No LDS congregations functioned in Iran as of 2018.

## **Activity and Retention**

Iranian converts tended to have strong intent on joining the Church due to intense opposition from family and the community. However, these issues can result in some not remaining active and returning to their former beliefs. Active Iranian LDS membership outside Iran is estimated between 300 and 500.

## **Language Materials**

**Languages with LDS Scripture:** Farsi, Arabic, Armenian (East), Armenian (West), Turkish.

General Conference talks have been translated into Farsi at least since 2007, and audio translations are provided on the Church's website.<sup>[12]</sup> All LDS scriptures are available in Arabic and Armenian (East). The Book of Mormon, Gospel Principles, The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and a few additional proselytism materials are available in Farsi. Many church materials are available in Arabic. Armenian (East), typically spoken by Armenians from Armenia, has a several priesthood, unit, temple, Relief Society, Sunday School, teacher development, young women, primary, missionary, audio/visual, family history, church proclamations, hymns, and children's song materials available. The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Book of Mormon selections, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price are translated into the western dialect of Armenian, which is spoken by ethnic Armenians outside of Armenia. Only the Book of Mormon has been translated into Turkish. Many unit, temple, priesthood, Relief Society, Sunday School, young women, primary, missionary, and family history materials are available in Turkish. Pashto language materials include Gospel Principles and The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

## **Meetinghouses**

The Church owned an apartment building for church activities in Tehran. The building was confiscated by the Iranian government in late 1979.<sup>[13]</sup>

## **Health and Safety**

Iranian Latter-day Saints face considerable persecution and harassment from government, family, and friends. There have been instances of Iranian LDS converts fleeing relatives who seek to physically harm them. Apostasy from Islam can be punished by death in Iran, although this is uncommon. Christian converts are typically harassed and sometimes arrested.

Any travel of American nationals to Iran at present is extremely unsafe. It is not possible for United States citizens to obtain a visa to enter Iran due to the lack of diplomatic relations. Americans who have traveled to Iran or who have wandered into Iranian territory have been detained for extended and indefinite periods, and Iranian-Americans with dual citizenship and family ties to Iran have sometimes been arrested on allegations of spying. Travelers from the United Kingdom and other Western European nations have generally been able to obtain tourist visas, although any religious proselytism is strictly forbidden. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, and some other nations in the region have positive relations with Iran, and their citizens experience greater freedom of travel.

## **Humanitarian and Development Work**

In 1990, the Church sent 975 sleeping bags and 550 family tents to earthquake victims.<sup>[14]</sup> In 2004, the Iranian ambassador to the United Nations thanked the LDS Church for a shipment of medicine to Bam following an earthquake that killed 28,000. The shipment was large enough to treat nearly 100,000.<sup>[15]</sup>

## **Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects**

### **Religious Freedom**

The current intimidation of religious minority groups by government officials, the many restrictions in place on non-Muslims, and



unfavorable relations between Iran and Western governments, particularly the United States, are the greatest obstacles preventing an official LDS presence in Iran. The Church will only have prospects of a future presence once the government has become more tolerant of religious minorities. In 2018, political and social conditions appeared unfavorable for church-sponsored humanitarian and development work although great need exists in many areas.

## **Cultural Issues**

The strong influence of Islam on everyday life and the subjection of non-Muslims to Islamic laws and customs present major obstacles. With only a couple exceptions such as Turkey, the Church has not systematically conducted missionary work in recent years among nations with a homogenous Muslim population and has little experience with issues that may arise regarding the ostracism of formerly Muslim converts and discrimination directed towards Christian converts resulting sometimes in the loss of housing, employment, and education. Iran has many religious and ethnic minority groups that the Church has never conducted mission outreach among, such as Zoroastrians, Iranian Baha'is, and Azeris. If LDS missionary activity were to occur in Iran one day, the Church will need to be culturally sensitive to local needs and to develop a suitable teaching approach. The Church has made some accommodations to Muslim culture regarding day of worship, as Church meetings were held on Fridays in accordance with the Muslim holy day of the week when there was an LDS presence in Iran in the 1970s.<sup>[16]</sup> The Church has yet to develop teaching and missionary approached tailored to Muslims.

## **National Outreach**

Iranians have lacked consistent LDS mission efforts over the past several decades due to the closure of the Iran Tehran Mission and changing policies regarding the baptism of former Muslims in different areas of the world. For example, in the late 2000s, the California Anaheim Mission began a Farsi-language Sunday School and proselytism efforts targeting Farsi speakers in the Anaheim area. Returned missionaries report that efforts targeting Farsi-speakers were brought to a halt by regional Church leadership who deemed proselytism efforts among Iranians were too dangerous at the time. Returned missionaries further elaborated that currently mission president approval must be granted to distribute Farsi Latter-day Saint materials to Iranians in the California Anaheim Mission. However, these restrictions have not applied to ordinary members in the Church. These policies appeared to be later reversed as the Church had established official Farsi-speaking proselytism programs in several missions during the 2010s such as in multiple missions in southern California and the Canada Toronto Mission. Furthermore, missionaries in several areas of the world reported frequent proselytism efforts among Iranians during the mid and late 2010s, such as in Western Europe, Turkey, and Australia.

Farsi-speaking LDS members have created Internet-outreach websites containing Farsi LDS language materials, such as <http://www.farsimormon.com/>. In 2018, the Church had posted many of its Farsi translations on its official website, lds.org.

## **Member Activity and Convert Retention**

Iranians who have joined the Church have overall demonstrated moderate to high levels of activity due to pursuing church membership notwithstanding social consequences of ostracism and ridicule. Many Iranian converts have experienced long pre-baptismal preparation as they contemplated these issues. Some Iranian converts have not remained active due to social pressures or as a result of not developing a strong testimony.

## **Ethnic Issues and Integration**

Although considerably more ethnic diversity exists in Iran compared to other nations in the Middle East, little ethnic violence or conflict has occurred. Iranian Azeris regard themselves as full citizens of Iran, and many prominent Iranians, including both the supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei and the head of the Iranian opposition, have been Azeris. This stability and relative interethnic harmony may result in greater ease in assimilation. Both Persians and Azeris are Shiites; minority groups from other ethnic backgrounds and religions experience less tolerance.

## **Language Issues**

Although some LDS Church materials are translated into Arabic, Farsi, Turkish, and Armenian (East and West), tens of millions of Iranians have no church materials translated into their native languages. As many of these languages are only spoken in Iran, prospects for forthcoming materials in these languages appear doubtful until official church activity restarts and large numbers of converts who speak these languages join the Church.

## **Missionary Service**

Several Iranians have served LDS missions despite the limited numbers of Iranian members. Returned missionaries provide a valuable source of future leadership for when the Church conducts Iranian-directed proselytism outside Iran.

## **Leadership**

Iranian membership remains too small to supply sufficient leadership for church growth in Iran. Farsi-speaking priesthood holders appear too few in most areas to merit the creation of Farsi-speaking congregations abroad.

## **Temple**

Iran pertains to the Frankfurt Germany Temple district, although the Kyiv Ukraine temple is now considerably closer.

## **Comparative Growth**

Iran and Turkey are the only homogenous Muslim nations in the past sixty years to have an LDS mission established, albeit missions in each of these countries operated for less than five years. Iranian Persians constitute a predominantly Muslim ethnic group that has one of the largest Latter-day Saint populations, although almost all Iranian Latter-day Saints today live outside their home country. Other Muslim countries that contain sizable LDS populations include Indonesia, Pakistan, and Jordan. In 2010, Iran was one of the only nations in the Middle East/Africa North Area without any LDS congregations. Christians have struggled to gain converts in Iran due to slow growth prior to the Iranian Revolution and the exodus of many Iranian Christians to Western countries despite better receptivity than neighboring Muslim-majority nations. Nevertheless, proselytism-focused Christians report good receptivity among Iranians who live abroad. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses report hundreds of congregations worldwide that conduct worship services in Iranian Persian, particularly in Europe.

## **Future Prospects**

With the seventeenth largest population in the world, Iran is the most populous nation to severely restrict religious freedom to the point that there cannot be a public or a private LDS presence. The political situation and the status of religious freedom for non-Muslims continue to deteriorate in Iran, making any potential Latter-day Saint presence unfeasible for the foreseeable future. However, meaningful opportunities exist to conduct outreach directed to Iranians living abroad, especially in Europe, Canada, and the United States, in which the small Iranian Latter-day Saint community can participate. There have been no past LDS mission outreach targeting non-Persian Iranians, especially Azeris, and it is unclear how these ethnic groups will react to prospective missionary activity if political and religious freedom conditions improve and a formal LDS Church presence is established. Steady growth among Iranians living abroad during the past decade may warrant the organization of additional Farsi-speaking congregations in locations such as southern California, Canada, and Western Europe.

- [1] "Background Note: Iran," Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, 23 July 2010. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5314.htm>
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- [4] "Iran," International Religious Freedom Report 2017. Accessed 25 September 2018. <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dliid=280982#wrapper>
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- [7] "Comment," Ensign, Dec 1974, 68.
- [8] Williams, Pamela S. "We Were the Church—in Iran," Ensign, Apr 1974, 10.
- [9] "Comment," Ensign, Dec 1974, 68.
- [10] "Iran," Global Mormonism, retrieved 28 August 2010. [http://globalmormonism.byu.edu/?page\\_id=82](http://globalmormonism.byu.edu/?page_id=82)
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- [12] "General Conference Reports—Farsi (Persian)," www.lds.org, retrieved 28 August 2010. <http://lds.org/conference/display/0,5234,89-128,00.html>
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- [15] "Relief sent to Iran," LDS Church News, 3 January 2004. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/44912/Relief-sent-to-Iran.html>
- [16] "FYI: For Your Information," New Era, May 1978, 43.