



BUSINESS AS MISSION  
GLOBAL THINK TANK

REGIONAL GROUP REPORT

# Laboring in the Dark: Business in Iran

BAM Think Tank Iran  
Regional Group Report

# Laboring in the Dark

## Business in Iran

Report by the **Business as Mission Think Tank**  
**Iran Regional Group**  
**December 2013**

[bamthinktank.org](http://bamthinktank.org)

---

**Report Author and Editor**  
Bill

**Group Contributors**  
Bill, RJ, Mats

**Acknowledgements**  
Dedicated to all those that labor in the dark.



**Executive Editors**  
Jo Plummer and Mats Tunehag

## Reports in this Series

### **BAM Think Tank Issue Group Reports**

**Papers will be available on the following topics†:**

Your Kingdom Come, Your Will Be Done... in Business: Biblical Foundations for Business as Mission

Business as Mission and the End of Poverty: BAM at the Base of the Pyramid

A Business Takeover: Combating the Business of the Sex Trade with Business as Mission

Business as Mission Franchising: Replicating Proven Businesses

A Dangerous Calling?: The Challenge of Business as Mission in Hostile Environments

Business as Mission and Church Planting: Fruitful Practices for Establishing Faith Communities

How Are We Doing?: Measuring the Impact and Performance of BAM Businesses

Scholars Needed: The Current State of Business as Mission Research

Planting, Watering, Growing: God's Creative Design... Incubation

No Water... No Fish: Funding is Vital to Business as Mission Success and Sustainability

Recruiting, Training and Deployment of Business as Mission Practitioners: Successes and Challenges

Fishing in a Bigger Pool: Marketing, Messaging and Engagement in Business as Mission

Mission Agencies: Challenges and Opportunities for Business as Mission

Business as Mission is Closer Than You Think: The Opportunity of BAM in Near Places

Macro Impact Still on the Horizon: Transformation Through BAM Has Not Reached the City, Nation, or Cultural Level... Yet!

Strategic Considerations: Business as Mission in the Coming Decades

### **BAM Think Tank Regional Group Reports**

**Papers and/or case studies will be available on BAM in or from the following countries or regions†:**

|               |                  |
|---------------|------------------|
| Korea         | China            |
| Mongolia      | Indonesia        |
| Singapore     | India            |
| Bangladesh    | Central Asia     |
| Iran          | Turkey           |
| East Africa   | Nordic Countries |
| Netherlands   | Haiti            |
| Latin America | North America    |

† Preliminary list as of October 1, 2013

# Table of Contents

|  |          |
|--|----------|
| <b>Foreword .....</b>  | <b>1</b> |
| <b>Executive Summary .....</b>                               | <b>3</b> |
| <b>Laboring in the Dark.....</b>                             | <b>4</b> |
| <b>Introduction .....</b>                                    | <b>4</b> |
| <b>Business Survey Summary .....</b>                         | <b>4</b> |
| <b>The Challenges and Opportunities of BAM in Iran .....</b> | <b>5</b> |
| <b>Overarching Forecasts for 2015-2025 .....</b>             | <b>6</b> |
| <b>Conclusion .....</b>                                      | <b>7</b> |
| <b>Recommendations and Action Plans .....</b>                | <b>8</b> |

# Foreword

The Global Think Tank on Business as Mission has opened up a unique forum for collaboration among practitioners and leaders from around the world. When we began this second Think Tank initiative, we focused on a key word: *invigorate*. The purpose of the Think Tank has been to invigorate the global business as mission movement, to equip and encourage those who want to serve God and the common good in and through businesses—among all peoples.

To that end we launched over 30 national, regional and international working groups. Some of these groups focused on a particular issue in the BAM movement, and others were concentrating on BAM in and from a particular region or country.

The objectives for these groups were to listen, learn, share and connect. We developed tools and templates for the working groups to effectively collaborate through virtual meetings, as well as face-to-face consultations. Each group has produced materials, including papers, analyses, case studies, tools and resource directories, as a result of this dialogue.

To enable a meaningful and constructive conversation in and between groups, we have used the following working definition of business as mission:

Business as mission is:

- Profitable and sustainable businesses;
- Intentional about Kingdom of God purpose and impact on people and nations;
- Focused on holistic transformation and the multiple bottom lines of economic, social, environmental and spiritual outcomes;
- Concerned about the world's poorest and least evangelized peoples.

This definition emerged from the first Think Tank on BAM, which among other things produced the Lausanne Occasional Paper on Business as Mission, as well as the BAM Manifesto: [http://www.lausanne.org/docs/2004forum/LOP59\\_IG30.pdf](http://www.lausanne.org/docs/2004forum/LOP59_IG30.pdf).

The Think Tank project has resulted in a massive global gathering of both intellectual and social capital for the BAM movement. As well as the written materials, we have built networks and have gathered together in person at the working group Leaders Forum and at the Global Congress on Business as Mission, both held in Thailand in April 2013. The intention is to now share and disseminate these gathered resources as widely as possible.

This report is one in a series of papers from the 30 plus working groups. Hundreds of leaders in the BAM community, from every continent, have contributed to these reports. Additional Think Tank reports may be found at <http://bamthinktank.org/reports>.

In 2014 we will publish a comprehensive BAM 2.0 paper, a follow up to the Lausanne BAM Paper of 2004.

These reports are not the end or the final destination of the BAM Think Tank, but should rather be seen as important reflections by BAM practitioners and other leaders who will continue to journey together. We need to continue to grapple with issues, and address needs and gaps. Some groups will continue and new initiatives will emerge. The BAM movement is on the move!

It has been a privilege to facilitate this unprecedented and global collaboration over the last two years. Looking back we can see that at times we have achieved less than we have hoped and planned for. But we have also witnessed that God is able to do more than we could have ever imagined.

Our sincere thanks goes to all those who have co-laboured with us to bring the Think Tank initiative to fruition. We want to especially thank the Steering Group, the Issue and Regional Group Leaders, the Support Team and our spouses Mark and Jennifer for their steadfast support.

We pray that these papers, case studies, tools, recommendations and resources would go out widely, and encourage and equip you as well as invigorate the global BAM movement.

“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen” (Eph. 3:20-21, NIV).

Jo Plummer & Mats Tunehag

September 2013

Co-Chairs

[chairs@bamthinktank.org](mailto:chairs@bamthinktank.org)

# Executive Summary

## Laboring in the Dark: Business in Iran

Iran is an extremely hostile environment for any endeavor that is not instigated and controlled by the Islamic Government and its sympathizers. This creates significant challenges for the Christian Community to create and operate businesses that promote Biblical values. In addition, due to the xenophobia of the Islamic Government and the imposition of International Sanctions, it is very difficult for the larger world wide Christian Community to provide any assistance or support.

Internally, the Christian Community is viewed as a threat to the Islamic Government and to openly identify oneself as part of that community is to invite persecution and potential death. Thus any identification of individuals or businesses as being an expression of the Christian Community is extremely dangerous and invites opposition.

In the area of economic activity, any enterprise of significant value is controlled and managed by the Islamic Government and is subject to its Islamic rules and regulations. Thus, to create and operate a significant business enterprise that is not owned and operated by a supporter of the Islamic Government and its values is nearly impossible.

However, despite the challenges of doing business in such a hostile environment, there are business examples to learn from. This report shares a summary of findings from a survey of 25 businesses in Iran. Many of these businesses are smaller in scale and tend to stay under the radar. The report shares survival principles and lessons learned from these businesses, as well as a summary of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats for business as mission in Iran.

The isolation of the Islamic Government, whether due to International Sanctions or self-imposed, creates an environment of suspicion of any foreign support or involvement. Thus the National Christian Community suffers from the same isolation and we on the outside are very limited in what we can do. However, this report does contain some recommendations for networking and facilitation activities that could strengthen business efforts in Iran.

In spite of the dark conditions, God is at work in Iran. It is a testament to the Grace of God and the perseverance of His people in Iran that in fact there is a powerful underground movement in the country that is having a great impact on the people and society, and yet is hidden from sight.

There are many parallels between the old Soviet Union—and what was known as the Iron Curtain—and the Iran of today. We could say that Iran has a 'Black Curtain' of religious and political darkness that shrouds the nation. The oppression and control is similar and we believe that the eventual collapse of the Black Curtain is also inevitable. In the meantime, it is our honor to continue to stand with and support our brothers and sisters in Iran, as we also look forward to and prepare for the day that the curtain comes down!

This report provides some insight into these courageous efforts to bring the transformational power of the Gospel through businesses to the dear people of Iran.

# Laboring in the Dark

## Business in Iran

### Introduction

Iran is an extremely hostile environment for any endeavor that is not instigated and controlled by the Islamic Government and its sympathizers. This creates significant challenges for the Christian Community to create and operate businesses that promote Biblical values. In addition, due to the xenophobia of the Islamic Government and the imposition of International Sanctions, it is very difficult for the larger world wide Christian Community to provide any assistance or support.

Internally, the Christian Community is viewed as a threat to the Islamic Government and to openly identify oneself as part of that community is to invite persecution and potential death. Thus any identification of individuals or businesses as being an expression of the Christian Community is extremely dangerous and invites opposition.

Conducting a detailed survey of businesses in Iran that would clearly identify people, places and businesses with the Christian Community is not possible or wise. Thus we conducted our survey of 25 businesses by gathering general information from secondary sources, since much activity is by necessity conducted underground. While we believe the data is trust worthy, and confirmed from multiple sources, it is from anonymous sources and unattributed.

### Business Survey Summary

The 25 businesses included in this survey:

- Range from 6 months to 8 years in operation.
- Out of 25, 3 or 4 have failed.
- Have 4 – 8 employees, and are often all members of one family.

### Business Vision and Purpose

The most common reasons given for operating the business are to:

- Provide employment
- Generate income
- Provide a platform for evangelism
- Provide a platform for discipleship

### Types of Businesses

The most common types of businesses are:

- Fast Food Stores
- Taxi cabs
- Beauticians
- Coffee Shops
- Grocery Stores
- Fruit Orchard

## **Business Survival Principles**

The following principles are followed by the businesses:

- Grow and expand by adding more businesses.
- High customer interaction or service businesses.
- Be a cash business.
- Stay under the radar.
- Avoid attention from Government inspectors and officials.
- Keep number of employees small.
- Keep capital requirement minimal (\$10K-\$25K).

## **Lessons Learned**

The following are lessons learned through business experience in Iran.

- There is a difficulty in finding qualified people. There must be a rigorous application and selection process.
- There is difficulty in get funding into country, that means that local cash is better if it is available.
- Underground Church Network leaders often have oversight and provide the resources, but the business is owned by the business person and they are responsible to make it work.

## **The Challenges and Opportunities of BAM in Iran**

The following is a summary of the Iran Regional Group SWOT Analysis for BAM in Iran.

### **Strengths (internal)**

- There is interest from the leadership of the Iranian church.
- There is a real need.
- There are people in business.
- There are good resources and people.
- There is a history and culture that supports business.
- There is a well educated and motivated workforce.
- We have existing BAM networks.
- We have linkages to networks to engage with.

### **Weaknesses (internal)**

- There is a lack of information sharing.
- There is a lack of businesses that have BAM intentionality.
- Weak economy.
- Social evils.
- Security fears.

- Lack of training in BAM.
- Lack of national leadership in BAM.
- Confusion over the role of the Underground Church Network leadership and the business leader, and ownership issues.

### **Opportunities (external)**

- Global interest in Iran is high.
- Link with China, India and Latin American connections.
- This is a time of spiritual harvest.
- Change lives through transformational businesses (BAM).
- Fight crime and social ills through BAM.
- Dubai connections.
- Post regime potential.

### **Threats (external)**

- Government opposition.
- Government propaganda.
- Religious persecution.
- Corruption.
- Security threats.
- International sanctions.
- Economic meltdown and inflation.

## **Overarching Forecasts for 2015-2025**

1. Iran's population is growing slowly, and will likely begin to decline after 2040.
2. Iran is urbanizing, with vast numbers leaving the poverty of the rural regions to seek a better life in the cities. Tehran in particular is a magnet. This urbanization trend actually indicates an opportunity for BAM in the neglected rural areas. However, we had only one example of a rural project in our survey.
3. Slowing growth will cause the average age to rise.
4. The economy is disintegrating, leading to anger, hopelessness and despair on the part of millions of people. Iran is experiencing a "brain drain" as many of the frustrated and discontents, having no hope for a better future in their lifetime, are leaving the country.
5. Iran is in the midst of a cultural unraveling which we estimate will last until somewhere around 2030, at which point the nation will enter a crisis.
6. Potential Sparks and wildcards:
  - An almost certain earthquake (fault lines cover 90% of Iran).
  - A lack of self-sufficiency in food, and bread price spikes.

- The impact of shrinking oil revenues on the government's budget.
- Societal breakdown, especially due to divorce, drugs and prostitution.
- The influence of women and the boiling point of their education.
- Illegal technologies that connect Iranians to the world and shape views.

7. Many are discontent with the government, but the chance for liberalization is low.

8. Iran will be Islamic for the immediate future. However, the church has endured since ancient times, and won't be eradicated any time soon.

9. Much modern church growth is fueled by disgust with Islam, but the impact of long-term evangelistic efforts, media, and the boldness of believers should not be underestimated.

10. The church is growing in size, strength and maturity—but it will still be small and fragile for the next decade and beyond.

11. Iran will open up one day just as the Soviet Union did and we must be prepared for that day. Whether it is a gradual lifting of sanctions or sudden changes in the political landscape, we have to anticipate that there will be a rush of business activity in the country. We can foresee that there will be large infrastructure and oil industry projects that will be dominated by large multinationals, but there will also be thousands of smaller opportunities as the country's economy is transformed. This represents a strategic opportunity and we believe that BAM initiatives for this country need to be preparing for this eventuality.

## Conclusion

In the area of economic activity, any enterprise of significant value is controlled and managed by the Islamic Government and is subject to its Islamic rules and regulations. Thus, to create and operate a significant business enterprise that is not owned and operated by a supporter of the Islamic Government and its values is nearly impossible.

The isolation of the Islamic Government, whether due to International Sanctions or self-imposed, creates an environment of suspicion of any foreign support or involvement. Thus the National Christian Community suffers from the same isolation and we on the outside are very limited in what we can do.

In spite of these dark conditions, God is at work in Iran. It is a testament to the Grace of God and the perseverance of His people in Iran that in fact there is a powerful underground movement in the country that is having a great impact on the people and society, and yet is hidden from sight.

There are many parallels between the old Soviet Union—and what was known as the Iron Curtain—and the Iran of today. We could say that Iran has a 'Black Curtain' of religious and political darkness that shrouds the nation. The oppression and control is similar and we believe that the eventual collapse of the Black Curtain is also inevitable. In the meantime, it is our honor to continue to stand with and support our brothers and sisters in Iran, as we also look forward to and prepare for the day that the curtain comes down!

## **Recommendations and Action Plans**

Opportunity for active support from outside the country is limited. However, there are some facilitation actions that could be of benefit:

- Develop BAM contacts across the Underground Church Networks.
- Develop China and Latin American contacts that can access the Iranian market.
- Develop and execute Business and BAM Training for key leaders.
- Reach out to the Iranian Christian business community in the West and challenge them to return to Iran, when the Black Curtain falls, and to rebuild their country with the vision of transformational business (BAM).

Those wishing to communicate with the authors or the contributing group regarding these Recommendations and Action Plans may do so at [info@bamthinktank.org](mailto:info@bamthinktank.org).