

# Trends Across Middle East & North Africa

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## Introduction

This paper attempts to look at four major trends affecting the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as a whole and discuss the effect of each on the Church and Christian ministry in the region. I believe there are both positive and negative aspects to each trend. In this paper I try to justify the prediction that the times ahead of us will be “the best of times, the worst of times”:

- The best in terms of mission and growth of God's kingdom *esp. Algeria, Sudan & Iran*
- The worst in terms of suffering amongst Christians in the region, i.e. the abuse or denial of their human rights *for religious reasons*

Another question that interests me is to what extent is the MENA similar to other regions of the world and in what ways is it unique? From such analysis, what can we learn or suggest that will help mission? In including this I seek partly to elicit comments that sharpen my own thinking, and to encourage others to conduct a similar analysis for their own ministry.

### **Human Rights**

My own ministry is involved with Christians suffering for their faith, i.e. religious persecution. I work for Middle East Concern (MEC), which is an association of Christian agencies and individuals advocating the Religious Freedom of the Christian communities of the MENA. Many ministries

working in the region are members, as are some of the other Christian Human Rights organisations. MEC defines persecution as “the violation of human rights for religious reasons”.

MEC believes that Human Rights as derived from International law are:

- ✓ *Universal*, i.e. they apply to all human beings
- ✓ *Inalienable*, i.e. they apply irrespective of circumstances
- ✓ *Indivisible, interrelated and interdependent*, i.e. if one right is denied there are significant effects on others.

Such human rights include the following, noting that I list here only those that are referred to below:

- The right to life
- The right to liberty, which can only be removed under due process of law, which includes the presumption of innocence until proven guilty and the right of the accused to see and contest the evidence against them
- The right to security of place of abode and personal property
- The right to freedom of thought, opinion and expression
- The right to adopt a religion of one’s own choice (i.e. the right to convert), to express that faith privately and publicly with fellow adherents in designated places of worship, and to communicate with and travel to meet co-religionists nationally and internationally

So to the trends, noting how they interact with each other

## **1. Population growth**

The population is rising rapidly across the Arab world, with an annual growth rate of 2.7%. This is creating huge pressure on education systems and economies to provide sufficient jobs.

Egypt is often reckoned to grow by a million people every nine months, a population growth rate that means it needs to build, staff and equip a new classroom every 15 minutes in order to maintain average class sizes at present levels.

Across MENA, 50% of the population is under 18 years old.

These people will all enter the labour market in the next two decades. Will there be jobs for them? Economic expansion is essential to prevent massive social upheaval. Already unemployment rates exceed 25% in some places, including Iran and Yemen.

Oman and Saudi Arabia, to name but two, have formal programmes specifically to address unemployment. Both have a large percentage of migrant workers in the country and see reducing the number of such workers as one way to address the problem. Whether this works or not depends on more than simply economics and demographics; cultural factors will be important too. Specifically will local people be willing to do some types of jobs, or will migrants continue being brought in to do what are sometimes known as the three D’s, i.e. the degrading, the dirty and the dangerous?

Saudi Arabia has two impediments to change:

- ❖ Culturally, many Saudis will not take certain jobs, nor will they employ nationals themselves in such jobs. One example would be the family driver.
- ❖ Economically, low rates are paid in some industries. For example refuse collection is a state provided service operated under contract to Saudi firms who employ third-world migrant

workers. The pay rates that are sufficient to support a single migrant worker living in a low-cost communal environment and saving (or sending back home) very little. However the rate of pay would not support a national family. To increase the pay rate would cause very significant inflation, something that the globalisation system does not like (see below).

Other countries, particularly in the Gulf, face similar issues, but few have the same unemployment issues.

### **Effects on the Church**

In countries with a traditional Christian community, such as Egypt and Lebanon, then the proportion of the population that is regarded as Christian is declining. At independence in 1943 Lebanon was estimated to be over 50% Christian. Today, many Lebanese Christians accept that the country is 30-35% Christian, though most international sources suggest lower figures, e.g. the US Department of States' latest report gives the figure of 23%, and Sennott (2001) suggests 25%.

If one looks at registered voters then an official Lebanese source gives 40.3% for the Christians. This higher figure is reflecting the changing percentage of Christians in the population as a whole due to a much higher birth rate in the Muslim communities.

Sennott (2001) explores the trend of the declining traditional Churches in the central Middle East, noting that many Christians choose to emigrate.

In Egypt the percentage of Christians is declining for three reasons:

- a lower birth rate amongst Christian families than non-Christians
- a higher emigration rate amongst Christians
- the conversion to Islam of several thousand (nominal) Christians every year.

The latter is usually regarded as primarily a response to discrimination over jobs plus a small number for reasons of marriage.

It is a legitimate question as to whether the lower birth rate in Christian communities is due to religious or economic factors. It seems common globally that the wealthier a community is the fewer children they have. In MENA the Christian communities tend to be, on average, richer than the Muslim ones, and hence have lower birth rates.

### **Effects on Mission**

- ✓ Must create opportunities in education at all levels, i.e. from nursery to university level.
- ✓ Sports and youth ministries would seem likely to be effective. Christians in one North African country actively want South American Christians to come as sports coaches, with a special desire for Brazilian soccer coaches.
- ✓ Micro-enterprise development ministry highly appropriate. Note that one key aspect of persecution is discrimination in employment, both getting a job in the first place and career progression once employed.
- ✓ There are changing opportunities for mission in some places. For example, traditionally Christian missionaries have gone to Nepal as engineers. However today, Nepal has unemployed national engineers who have post-graduate qualifications. Therefore visas for expatriate engineers are no longer available. Mission must find other areas of work to facilitate ministry.
- ✓ A common development approach to population growth is to focus on the education of girls and the role of women in society (see following).

### Women's rights

On 29<sup>th</sup> September 2004 Nicholas Kristof writing in the New York Times, remarked that women's rights might be the crucial issue of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is mega-big-picture-stuff. He argued that ending slavery was a crucially significant theme running through the 19<sup>th</sup> century and defeating totalitarianism (of both the fascist right and communist left) likewise for the 20<sup>th</sup>. What, he asked, would be the equivalent for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? His own answer is women's rights, and he started with the sentencing of a Pakistani lady to be gang raped as punishment for adultery committed by male members of her ethnic community with members of a neighbouring community. If he is correct, then what are the implications for mission? Is there the opportunity to become involved within an emerging global social agenda whose aims we would endorse?

Are the effects of primarily Christian led initiatives such as fair trade and (more controversially) third-world debt relief an encouragement to engage with big issues? Does taking a long-term view allow us to appreciate the widespread benefits that such transformations can bring?

One final comment. As someone who works in the field of human rights, it is my opinion that if women's rights are respected and upheld legally and socially within a community then human rights for minorities are upheld and respected too. This linkage comes from the indivisibility and interrelated nature of human rights (see above). Therefore, working on human rights for women is one way of effecting positive change for minorities, which in the MENA region includes Christians.

### ***Comparison with Rest of the World***

The MENA region is the part of the world with the highest proportion of people under 16, though countries in other regions do have similar trends, e.g. Pakistan and Bangladesh.

There is a sharp contrast with Europe, which has zero, or even negative, natural population growth. Some argue that this area will need immigrants to counter the economic effects of an aging population, though others contest this. Spencer (2004) has a discussion of the topic, concluding that there is evidence for and against.

### ***Effect on Persecution***

There is a tendency for Christians to feel more oppressed as they realise they are a smaller minority.

One area of persecution is adverse discrimination concerning jobs, both getting a job in the first place and then career progression with the employer. Reaching the senior ranks of the public service and military is extremely difficult. One consequence is that Christians tend to work for firms owned and predominantly staffed by Christians. Consequently, workplace ministry to non-Christians becomes less likely, and Christian *ghettoisation* more likely.

## **2. Globalisation**

For the purposes of this paper, I regard myself as an "A-Globalist"; that is, I am neither pro nor anti. I do not intend to suggest that we say globalisation is a good thing that we should be actively encouraging or a bad thing that should be resisted. I simply regard it as a fact, as something that is occurring and shaping the region.

I do think there is scope for a debate about whether Christians can and should attempt to steer the globalisation process in certain directions, if, indeed, such is possible.

Friedman (2000) argues that there was a previous period of globalisation in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. That period was powered by steam and policed by the British whose navy maintained international shipping lanes. The modern period is powered by developments in information technology (IT) and policed by the US. Some would add that modern globalisation is also driven by oil (see below).

Kelly (2003) notes that historically, the Puritan work ethic developed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century so that people could save, invest and give. The industrial revolution brought more products for the middle and upper classes, but not for the working classes. When mass production started, this allowed the lower classes to own but not choose (e.g. all model T Ford cars were black). Choice for all has developed more recently, and Kurten (1995) notes that it required the emergence of the advertising industry to challenge the Puritan ethic and facilitate greater consumption.

Here, we will look at a few aspects, though I do suggest that these cover all the basic features of the phenomenon that is globalisation.

First, satellite television and more latterly the Internet have enabled everyone to know how everyone else lives. They expose people to ideas from other parts of the world. Admittedly, the predominant direction is one way, that is American culture and values are presented globally. One consequence is that the desire for choice is sown, aspirations are raised. This is perhaps most clearly seen in music tastes and dress codes. These trends are strongest amongst the young. I suggest that this creates an openness to change, and to consideration of other ideas and values.

Globalisation has also made the means of communication readily available. The internet allows anyone to be a publisher. Satellite TV channels are operated by many. CNN and the BBC might have pioneered being global news broadcasters, but regional channels have become prevalent, including Al Jazeera and Al Arabia within MENA.

Second, there is an increased movement of people around the world in search of opportunity and improvement. *(esp upper level + manual -- in-between is harder)*

This drives urbanisation. In turn it challenges the extended family culture, which in many places is the basis of social security.

Third, there is a drive for better education. Western economies are said to be knowledge based, a reflection that services are a larger proportion of economies than manufacturing and agriculture combined. What matters most is what you know and how you can apply it, as distinct from practical skills. It is said that one "learns a living", i.e. one must keep learning in order to continue being employable. Consequently, education becomes a high priority and a life long process.

Further, education, and especially higher education, has become an international business. To attract foreign students educational establishments seek formal accreditation to demonstrate that the courses they provide are worthwhile.

This accreditation process is now spreading down to schools, whose motivation is that their pupils will gain easy acceptance by universities in other countries. For example, one Lebanese Christian school is actively seeking to join a scheme because it would enable their pupils to have their achievements easily recognised when applying to American universities. The process of accreditation is lengthy and thorough including governance, management, administration in addition to teaching standards. It is also expensive with an annual fee of \$25,000 a year!

Paradoxically, this trend is leading to an hereditary-meritocracy, i.e. the better educated are more able to provide a better education for their children, hence their children have better prospects than their contemporaries whose parents are less well educated.

Two trends can be seen in MENA:

- This internationalisation of education is producing calls from within academic circles in MENA for greater academic freedom. For example, in March 2004 there was a conference of 150 academics from across the region. Held in Egypt and opened by President Mubarak, it produced a 20-page report calling for greater academic freedom and other Human Rights for the benefit of the region as a whole.
- There is greater emphasis on education in the region. For example, in February 2005 Morocco received a World Bank loan to support improvements in its education system. The same report noted that school enrolment rates have increased, comparing 1991-92 with 2003-4 rates have risen from 52% to 93% for primary education, from 18% to 32% for middle school and from 6% to 15% for secondary<sup>1</sup>. Demand for places in middle schools is under pressure due to the population growth (see above) and the improved enrolment rate at primary levels.

Fourth, security issues are being redefined because many issues are trans-national. Examples include disease, global warming, environmental concern, food safety and security of supply, illegal drugs, organised crime in general and terrorism. Napoleoni (2004) notes that globalisation is "terror's unwilling ally" (see below).

Fifth, economic investment requires the clear rule of law, together with economic and social stability. Friedman (2000) notes that globalisation increases the need for good government. Good here means consistent, stable and dependable. As noted above (concerning addressing unemployment in Saudi Arabia) inflation is not welcome.

Good intellectual property rights are crucial for a service industry to operate in a country.

Libya has recently taken serious steps to become once more an accepted member of the international community. It seeks greater economic investment, i.e. to become an active part of globalisation. However, with a few exceptions, international business is not yet moving in. Instead it is waiting for the legal system to be reformed to be conducive to international investment.

In 2003 Qatar approved a new constitution in a referendum, stating the Human Rights of citizens including freedom of religion. It is scheduled to come into force during 2005. I suggest this is an example of the modernisation of a state, at least in theory, to be fully acceptable within the international community.

Two areas to explore concerning the interaction of globalisation and international standards:

- Does globalisation promote democracy? China would seem to be an example of a country operating well within globalisation without being democratic. But, how sustainable is this in the longer term as living standards rise closer to Western levels? Or is China an exception due to its size and hence effect on global markets?
- Is the whole Human Rights discourse seen as a Western construct and imposition? I suggest we need to acknowledge that some in MENA think so. However, it is not everyone. Indeed in May 2004 the Arab League adopted a revised Charter on Human Rights, adapting the *UN Declaration on Human Rights* of 1948 and the ensuing *International Covenant on*

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<sup>1</sup> Reported by ArabicNews.com on 10<sup>th</sup> February 2005

*Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR) of 1966 to the Arab context<sup>2</sup>. This document replaced one approved in 1994. It is much a clearer document, and does include freedom of thought, conscience and religion, though it carefully and deliberately does not endorse change of religion<sup>3</sup>. By February 2005 four countries had formally adopted the new charter, which is rapid progress for such an international charter (e.g. compare the progress with adoption of the Kyoto Protocol). The Charter becomes effective when the seventh nation does so. Historically there was Arab involvement in the writing of ICCPR. Charles Malak, who is Lebanese, was part of the committee and also a spokesman for the Arab League. It is worth noting that the report from the March 2004 academics conference described above urged President Mubarak and other leaders not to reject this call just because Western politicians were talking about the need for reform in the Arab world. Clearly, some think that overt Western pressure for change might be counter-productive.

Sixth, we should note the trend seen in many places of actively seeking to preserve local culture whilst embracing aspects of globalisation. The term *glocalisation* has been coined for this.

This can lead to unique cultural combinations as individuals, or even whole communities, appear to have adopted global characteristics but occasionally, and perhaps abruptly, display elements of their indigenous culture. For example a friend who had lived in India was surprised one day when someone he knew well (or at least thought he did!) refused the offer of a meeting the next day because of a religious event. Where, my friend thought, did that come from when he displays no other signs of the indigenous culture? Be prepared to be surprised!

### **Effects on Church**

The movement of people in search of opportunity facilitates the emigration of Christians, especially the better educated and more able. Consequently, the Christian community is denied its future leadership.

The local Church must handle the exposure to materialism and consumerism that has challenged the church in many places. Likewise it must handle the generational issues caused.

Where globalisation is embraced it brings a clearer rule of law which is beneficial to all including the Christians. Further, it brings pressure for law to conform to international expectations.

Theologically and historically I suggest it promotes the need for good theology of wealth creation and stewardship.

### **Effects on Mission**

The maxim here must be "think globally, act locally".

I like to think that the Church of Jesus Christ should be the most global entity in the world! It should encompass the world, and endorse all cultures, transforming them, but not obliterating them.

Some traditional mission activity is being removed, e.g. the example of engineers going to Nepal noted above.

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<sup>2</sup> Note that a UN Declaration has no legal force; it represents the majority view of the UN General Assembly on the day it is voted on, which gives it some moral authority. Declarations usually lead to the drafting of a Covenant or Charter encoding the declaration into a document to which UN member states are invited to become so called *state parties* voluntarily committing themselves to abide by the provisions therein. The Covenant or Charter becomes effective when a defined number of states duly become state parties.

<sup>3</sup> Article 30

Enough of the negative, there are far more positives.

- Media ministries are facilitated, and there are many with very effective work across the Arab World using satellite TV, both wide area and specifically focused radio, and the internet. It is noted that the language in which the Bible is most frequently downloaded is Arabic.
- New areas are becoming available, such as health and fitness, and conservation type ministries.
- Micro-enterprise ministries and Business as Mission approaches are facilitated.
- Consultancy is a growth industry, and allows Westerners to live and work in MENA and elsewhere.
- Traditional areas of mission such as education and training remain crucially needed.
- There are opportunities to evangelise people when they are on holiday, a method which seems applicable to people from nations where direct evangelism (as distinct from mass-media evangelism) is difficult.
- Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) affords, for the time being, massive opportunities. One Christian business man told me that he could place 3,000 such people around the world! These were salaried jobs, so no need to raise support. Where are the people? Who is communicating the need?
- Language training for some languages can now be done outside the areas where the languages are widely used, thus facilitating a certain level of training before people reach their field of service.

The movement of Christians into some areas is being facilitated, notably the Gulf. When Israel dramatically reduced the number of Palestinians working within Israel it replaced them with approximately 200,000 migrant workers, predominantly Christians. (It had a clear reason for not recruiting Muslims – see below.) This raises the question of how to equip, train, empower and support such people to consciously express their faith appropriately to those around them. Several missions are actively seeking to address this.

Likewise, there are many MENA nationals moving outside the region, and various ministries seek to make the gospel accessible to them. I heard recently of an inter-agency study starting into discipleship of Muslim converts across Europe prompted by the assessment that 75% revert to Islam within a few years. I am reminded that the great commission given to the Church by Jesus is to make disciples, not converts.

I believe it needs to be noted that the pressure on business to minimise costs in order to be competitive does exert pressure for reduced worker rights. This pressure is seen most clearly amongst those in weak and vulnerable positions. In MENA this is migrant workers (many of whom are Christian) whose rights are frequently abused by their employers. Examples include construction workers in Dubai and domestic workers across the Gulf region.

Does globalisation open people to being more conscious of religious choice in addition to their clothes and music preferences? Do people find their identity at the Mosque or the Mall? If so, then this is to be welcomed, as it aids Church growth.

Friedman (2000) notes that globalisation can be used against itself to promote higher standards for workers in developing countries. He gives the example of some Western customers not wanting to wear clothes produced by people working in poor conditions. Is there an opportunity for Western Christians to promote development by involvement in such campaigns? Can the Human Rights agenda be pressed forward?



### ***Comparison with Rest of the World***

Generally, I suggest that MENA is as affected by globalisation as everywhere else.

I wonder if there is a work-ethic issue within MENA? And if there is, how should we respond? If time with family and friends is highly valued then this should be encouraged.

### ***Effect on Persecution***

There are some very helpful aspects here. A key source of pressure in the region is from the family of those who convert to Christianity. A lessening of the extended family culture has potential for major benefit here. However, to realise this, new believers must become part of the family of God in a deeper sense, and must be accepted as such and cared for. The Church needs to be the social security of such people.

Well qualified Christians are more easily able to move to other countries to flee from persecution. This works only for the better educated, and has the longer term detriment of potentially removing future leaders of the Christian community.

Where globalisation is embraced, then it tends to lead to better Human Rights, which is a major benefit to the Church. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that it leads to better Human Rights in theory and even local legislation, but this does not always guarantee that such benefits will actually be realised in practice, especially by the economically weak, notably migrant workers from the developing world.

Conversely where globalisation is rejected then the country is ignored internationally, and the resulting marginalisation of the country reduces advocacy effectiveness. It is to be hoped that the Christian church globally does not ignore Christians in those countries that are shunned internationally, such as Zimbabwe.

In terms of supporting the persecuted, then modern communication facilitates their story being heard, the raising of prayer support and quick advocacy action from outside the region. Conversely it also aids the spreading of rumours and unconfirmed information. Recently one of my ministries press releases was re-published by another ministry when someone read the date but not the year, so two year old information was presented as new news! They apologised and issued a correction when notified of their error, however several other agencies had already republished their report. Source criticism is a key skill in the modern world, and maintenance of reputation as a credible provider of information is crucial to MEC's ministry.

Within MENA, I observe the tendency to create tension which is at times detrimental to indigenous Christians. This is explored in section four below.

### **3. Natural Resources, i.e. two liquids, black & blue**

There are two key natural resources across the region, both are liquids, one is black and the other blue. The issues that arise could be summarised as due to the abundant presence of the first and the growing shortage of the second. The black liquid is oil, the blue is fresh water.

Let's begin with oil and ask, is it a blessing?

The obvious answer should be yes; like all natural resources it is a gift from God to humanity.

However, some argue that large parts of MENA have been hindered in the development of their education and economic systems due to an over-reliance on oil<sup>4</sup>. They have relied on easy wealth rather than earned wealth.

Mauritania discovered oil in 2001 and expects full production to start in 2006. Some citizens think it will bring corruption and wealth for a few, but will not benefit the country as a whole. As one person working there remarked, they “want Arab oil, not African oil”.

The Mauritanian find has prompted speculation that there is oil off the coast of Western Sahara. Such speculation is hindering resolution of the contested sovereignty of this territory which is under Moroccan control with some seeking independence. In June 2004 former US Secretary of State James Baker resigned as the UN Special Representative for this area frustrated at the lack of progress towards an agreed solution.

Finally on oil, I note that the oil industry is an exception within globalisation to the trend of shunning places of tension, instability and violence.

Moving to water, Mark Twain is reported to have said “Whisky is for drinking, water is for fighting over”. Up to you concerning the whisky, but I suspect he is right about water. A few observations about fresh water in the region:

- Iraq gets only a third of the water it used to in the Euphrates and Tigris rivers due to dams in Turkey and irrigation in Syria
- Egypt continues to insist that a 1929 treaty on the use of the waters of the Nile be honoured by the nine countries that it flows through, despite the major demographic changes in all of them over 76 years (see population above)
- The Dead Sea drops by one metre a year. There is a joint proposal by Israel and Jordan to build a pipeline from the Gulf of Aqaba to the Dead Sea to restore the level. Hydro-electric power would be generated due to the 1,000 plus feet drop involved. The project is stalled because no one will finance the \$1 billion construction costs because of the unstable political and security situation (see above under globalisation).
- Yemen faces a major water shortage in the future as current extraction from underground aquifers is significantly higher than the replacement rate from rain water. Across the country as a whole the usage rate is 150% of the recharge rate, and in the area around the capital Sana'a the rate is even higher<sup>5</sup>. The population growth (see above) will make the situation worse.

Desalination is possible to meet fresh water needs. Modern filtration systems make this a reasonably affordable solution provided the end users do not live either too far from or too high above the sea. Water is heavy, and so pumping is expensive. One exception in the Middle East is Israel, whose major fresh water source is the Sea of Galilee. This is 425 feet below sea level, and so incurs greater pumping costs than would desalination.

One negative of globalisation is the tendency to make the rich richer and the poor poorer. There are big divides of wealth and poverty in the region.

### **Effects on Church**

I suggest we have a clear need for a theology of wealth creation, stewardship and ecology at the personal, local, national, regional and world levels.

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<sup>4</sup> E.g. An editorial entitled “Cursed by Oil” in the New York Times on 9<sup>th</sup> May 2004

<sup>5</sup> Reported by the UN’s IRIN News Service on 8<sup>th</sup> December 2004

### ***Effects on Mission***

First, to assist the local church with theological education in the areas noted above.

Second, to utilise business opportunities, both for access to the country and to assist national Christians in their business endeavours. One thing we need to note here is that oil workers are often kept away from nationals by compound living, motivated by geography (the oil industry is not generally located in residential areas) and security.

One concern expressed concerning Mauritania is that oil wealth will be perceived as removing the need for development, which would reduce the opportunities for Christian ministry. As always, opportunities should be used when and while they exist.

We might ask what can mission agencies learn from the oil industry concerning locating staff in dangerous places? I suspect the answer is very little because oil companies tend to house their people in (supposedly) secure compounds minimising interaction with local people. In contrast missions seek to maximise contact with local people.

Perhaps a better industry to study would be news media, though Bell (2003) questions how much actual contact many journalists have with local people. He argues they spend most of their time on hotel roof tops doing live broadcasts for numerous news bulletins. There is an emphasis on getting news out fast rather than gathering and checking information. Bell believes media should return to the maxim "we got it right" rather than "we got it first", something that I am especially conscious of in reporting religious persecution. Print journalists, especially columnists, might be more instructive.

### ***Comparison with Rest of the World***

An interesting question is how much of world's oil is found in unstable places? Not only in the Middle East but also in Nigeria, Venezuela. How stable in the long term is Russia?

#### Effects on Persecution

Superficially, this trend is fairly neutral in itself. However, as noted below, where there is overt inequality then unrest, violence and armed conflict can follow, and these tend to have a disproportionately adverse effect on minorities.

Further, the oil industry is an exception to the general globalisation principle that stability drives business away. The oil industry will operate in areas of uncertainty in a way that other industries will not. As such, it can exacerbate conflicts as it is portrayed as exploitation of local resources by foreigners for foreigners.

## **4. Violence and Extremism**

The Arab world has seen much violence in the past, has violence in parts at present, and seems likely to continue to see violence in the future. There is armed conflict at present in parts of Iraq and Sudan plus occasional acts of violence elsewhere. The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians continues, though at the time of writing armed violence is at a minimum.

I suggest that within MENA the church is growing most rapidly in Algeria, Iran and Sudan. These countries share the characteristic of either armed violence (Algeria and Sudan) or political oppression (Iran) done in the name of Islam. It seems that in such circumstances many reject Islam and consider other religions. Hence, while violence and oppression are not to be welcomed

or sought, neither should the mission endeavour fear them, since God often builds his Church in the midst of suffering.

How do Muslims view violence conducted in the name of Islam? I suggest there are three broad categories:

- a. Those who applaud and approve
- b. Those who condemn it as non-Islamic and accuse the perpetrators of hijacking Islamic discourse and belief to justify bad behaviour
- c. Those who sympathise with their motives but can neither condone nor condemn their actions.

Rev. Colin Chapman recently acknowledged that precise data did not exist but suggested that the Muslim population falls into these categories roughly 10-20%, 30-40% and 40-60% respectively<sup>6</sup>.

I recently heard a talk by Dr. David Zeidan who works for Barnabas Fund. He explained Jewish and Islamic eschatological thinking, noting the similarities and differences. In summary, ultra religious Jews fall into two broad categories:

- The ultra-orthodox who believe that Messiah will restore the Jewish nation and the Temple when he comes. His coming is to be looked forward to, but not actively sought, or even prayed for; Messiah will come in his time and he will do it. In the meantime, Torah must be studied and applied to life today.
- The nationalist-orthodox likewise look forward to the coming of Messiah, however his coming must be prepared for by restoration of the nation, purification of the whole land of Israel and the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple on Temple Mount. Non-Jews must either emigrate or accept Jewish rule over them, in which case citizenship can be granted. Some are willing to defend what has happened so far and wait patiently for further progress. Others, the Radical Messianic (or the radicals-within-the-radicals), seek to aggressively push the agenda forward. Cataclysmic events are to be welcomed because these will force God's hand to send Messiah soon.

Note the effect that these views have on political engagement.

Religious Jews are approximately 20% of the ethnically Jewish population of Israel, split roughly as 12.5% for the ultra-orthodox and 7.5% for the nationalist-orthodox. The remaining 80% are secular, sub-divided into traditionalists (about 50%) and radicals (about 30%). The latter seek a fully secular state. For example, marriage is one area of debate, the traditionalists accepting the status-quo that all marriages are religious ceremonies conducted by ministers of religion, the radicals wanting to introduce civil marriage and civil divorce.<sup>7</sup> Incidentally, civil marriage would resolve many problems for Christians, especially those who have converted from another faith, caused by religious control of marriage in particular and family law in general.

Likewise within Islamic eschatology one sees the common theme of seeking the return of Jesus who will establish an Islamic state with its capital in Jerusalem, vindicating Muslims and removing their shame. However there are two broad positions on how to live:

- The passive view, i.e. Jesus will come in his time and we must wait patiently and live as good Muslims until he does.

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<sup>6</sup> These figures were given during a lecture. The notes were subsequently made available on-line in the e-zine (i.e. online magazine) of Redcliffe College, see [www.redcliffe.org](http://www.redcliffe.org)

<sup>7</sup> The main political parties in Israel align with as follows: Labour & Likud are traditional secularists; Shinnui is radical secularist; Shas & United Torah Judaism are Ultra-Orthodox; National Union & National Religious Party (also called Mafdah) are National Orthodox

- The proactive view, that we should seek to establish this ideal now, by force if necessary, and any cataclysmic event that we may cause will have the effect of forcing God's hand so that Jesus returns immediately.

Similarities and differences with Christian eschatology are left as an exercise to the reader! However, I note that most of those Christians who seek cataclysmic events do so knowing that they will not directly effect where they live.

Secular commentators have noted that there is a war of ideas within Islam, e.g. Thomas Friedman, a New York Times columnist wrote a series of columns in January 2004 entitled the *War of Ideas*<sup>8</sup>. The implication is that the so called war on terror is ineffective because the problem can only be addressed from within Islamic societies. The role of Western nations should be to support moderate Arab voices, but taking care not to make their ideas seem like a Western agenda being imposed from outside.

In a similar vein, Bell (2003) argues that the *war on terror* is a contradiction in terms, since terror is a tactic, not an object that can be attacked and defeated. Who, he argues, could possibly sign a treaty ending the war on terror? Therefore this war can have no end. Further, it is not a realistic, achievable goal to eradicate a tactic. Western nations must learn to live with a low level of terrorist activity, and not be overly frightened by it.

The *war on terror* is having a profound effect on Human Rights. A report by Amnesty International described it as "A despot's dream come true", noting that autocratic rulers were using fighting terror as an excuse for over-riding human rights<sup>9</sup>. The report focussed on the governments of countries in the Arabian peninsula performing arrests without warrants and extraditing people (often to Guantanamo Bay) without due legal process. Many would argue that Israel does the same in its treatment of the Palestinians in general and prisoners in particular.

Western nations do not have an unblemished record, with violations of Human Rights such as Guantanamo Bay, the UK law on indefinite detention (without the need to show suspects the evidence against them), the abuse of Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib and Camp Buccra near Basra and the practice of extraordinary rendition<sup>10</sup>. The UK government asserts that it is balancing its responsibilities to (a) provide protection and security and (b) ensure the fundamental human rights of all citizens and visitors.

In August 2003 British Prime Minister Tony Blair told a joint session of the US Congress that "We will not win the *war on terror* without solving the Palestinian issue." Since then (ironically) there has very little international effort towards a resolution, though several initiatives from within the region including the Geneva Accords of December 2003 and the summit meeting involving Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and new Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

One trend seen across MENA is governments seeking to balance:

- a desire to modernise, to develop, primarily economically (see globalisation above), without
- alienating their conservative majority or empowering extremists.

This is a difficult balance, and one tactic that is sometimes employed is to take action against Christians, either national or expatriate, in order to appease elements within society and maintain

<sup>8</sup> The six part series appeared from 8<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> January 2004

<sup>9</sup> *The Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula: Human Rights fall victim to the war on terror*, AI index number MDE 04/002/2004 published 24<sup>th</sup> September 2004

<sup>10</sup> This is the practice of extraditing someone to a third country without due process where torture is used. An example of this by the USA was described on 18<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> February 2005 in the New York Times by columnist Bob Herbert

the balance. The tension is seen most clearly where there are younger, Western educated leaders, e.g. in Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco and Qatar. Morocco and Jordan have seen significant changes in the pattern of persecution in recent months<sup>11</sup>.

Weapons of mass destruction (WMD) remain a politically significant issue in the region. They were used in the justification for invading Iraq, though (to date) none have been found. Simpson (2003) argues that Iraq no longer had WMD because if it did they would have used them during the 2003 invasion. Libya is re-entering the international community having overtly renouncing such programmes and inviting international verification. The supposed development of nuclear weapons by Iran is a key political issue at present.

Dr Khan of Pakistan has admitted to selling nuclear technology to Libya and North Korea. Recently allegations emerged that he supplied equipment to Iran. There are suggestions by some that his clients also included Saudi Arabia and Syria. Napoleoni (2004) claims that his initial research and development was funded by Saudi Arabia. I would suggest that the route to a nuclear free Middle East is through an end to the Israeli government policy of ambiguity and a verifiable removal of its nuclear arsenal. Equally, I regard this as very unlikely to happen! Fortunately, most, and I trust all, governments see nuclear weapons as a means of deterring attacks by others, especially the USA. One wonders to what extent President Bush's inclusion of Iran in his "Axis of Evil" in January 2002 has prompted the Iranian leaders to seek an effective deterrent.

In practice, it is small arms that are used to inflict the overwhelming majority of deaths in armed conflict. Small arms means what can be carried by one person, i.e. rifles, RPGs. In parts of MENA such weapons are plentiful, e.g. Yemen is estimated to have three guns per person. The implication is that should conflict erupt, then how quickly high numbers of casualties start to occur depends on the availability of small arms.

One final observation is to note that commonly there is Church growth in situations of conflict. In such times, people are more conscious of the eternal, and spend more time considering spiritual matters. The saying "there are no atheists in fox holes" comes to mind.

Perhaps this is doubly so in MENA cultures. The term patri-linear cultures most commonly describes societies where inheritance is primarily through one line, the male, only. A wider use is for cultures where individuals derive their sense of identity and values from one parent only. Such cultures are typically less responsive to the gospel<sup>12</sup>. A social-psychological explanation would be that people in such cultures do not have to balance the different opinions, ideas and perceptions of two parents in the same way. Of note is that patri-linear cultures become more responsive to the gospel at times of major political change. This suggests that times of tension, violence and the drive for democratic reform might lead to greater openness to the gospel, i.e. to the "best of times".

### ***Effects on Church***

One clear effect is that violence encourages Christian emigration, for which Iraq is a clear example at present.

Another effect seen in Iraq is the targeting of indigenous Christians as being associated with the so called *Christian West*. This can work indirectly with Christians becoming the target of crime, especially kidnapping for ransom, due to the perception that they will have links with the West and hence access to money.

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<sup>11</sup> The incidents that justify this statement have not been made public

<sup>12</sup> Article entitled *Kinship and State: Arab States* by Diane E. King; date and original publication unknown

Amidst it all, what is our theology of suffering?

One Middle Eastern pastor noted that he saw "a pastor's role is to prepare his people to die well".

### **Effects on Mission**

First the big picture implications, starting with some questions:

- Does the humiliation of the Palestinians imply the humiliation of all Arab peoples?
- Likewise, does the invasion of Iraq since Baghdad was the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate for several centuries?
- What is the effect on evangelism?

In Iraq, the invasion first created new freedoms and opportunities. Christians from across the country could meet together, including those from the Kurdish parts. Alas, the deterioration of the security situation from about summer 2004 onwards has meant that expatriate Christians working in the Kurdish areas are unable to safely travel to the rest of the country. Indeed, mission work in the Arab areas has become very dangerous, even for Arab Christians.

New freedoms led to more evangelical churches forming in Baghdad, where the number went from five to 15 in a year. One church reckoned it was outgrowing its new premises even before they were completed. In response they sought to do a church plant into another suburb. It was indeed "the best of times".

I have heard two views recently concerning the Palestinian question: one person telling me he thought it the biggest hindrance to Muslim conversion, yet a second person said he had never yet met an MBB who said it was a factor to them. How do we explain this divergence of view?

I suggest that Christians typically view or explain violence by armed Muslim groups in one of two ways:

- a. Islam is innately violent, and violence comes from Islamic theology. Consequently the problem must be resolved by Islam. (E.g. see Riddell & Cotterell, 2003)
- b. Violence is a reaction to perceived injustice, usually Western imperialism or meddling in the affairs of others. Consequently, there is an imperative on the West, including Christians, to be involved in the solution. (E.g. see Chapman, 2004)

Most Christians acknowledge there are elements of both and it is a question of emphasis or predominance. I suggest that those who consider the Palestinian question a stumbling block take the second view, and those that think it is of no consequence the former. My own observations are that:

- It is generally less an issue the further one is geographically from Jerusalem
- It is less an issue to non-Arabs, e.g. Berbers and Kurds
- It seems less an issue in some countries than others, e.g. Egypt where Palestinians are generally disliked.

As for the local church, so for those engaged in cross-cultural mission, there is a need to be aware of their theology of suffering. What is the God of peace and justice doing about the conflict we observe?

Desmund Tutu used the contrast "restorative justice rather than retributive justice" when describing South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation process. We note that this was conducted after Apartheid was ended and a new political order had emerged. Key in this process were good prior research and the offer of amnesty to those who told the truth together with the assurance of no amnesty for those who either lied or remained silent. Within MENA, Morocco is currently conducting something

similar to deal with the Human Rights abuses, including what are euphemistically referred to as the disappearances of the 1980s and early 1990s. How, I ask, do we promote such initiatives elsewhere? Lebanon and Sudan would seem to be in need of a similar process.

Charitable funding is under great scrutiny. This was prompted by Western nations checking that Islamic charities were truly charities and not fronts (in whole or part) for the funding of armed groups. In October 2001 the US enacted the *Patriot Act* which includes the provision that any suspicious financial transaction in US dollars anywhere in the world must be reported to the US authorities. It is hard to see how this can be enforceable. One consequence has been that some international banks have advised major customers to switch from US dollars to other currencies. Indeed, Napoleoni (2003) suggests that this is one cause of the recent fall in the dollar. Armed groups had strong reason to switch and she notes that if they were among the first to do so then they are now, in dollar terms, 50% better off.

In 2004 a consortium of US groups produced a 32 page document describing the legal framework for grant making bodies<sup>13</sup>. They note that this is a rapidly changing area of law, including both criminal penalties and exposing the voluntary sector to civil action law suits.

Now for some more practical considerations:

- ✓ There is strong anti-Western sentiment affecting relationships, though it is often hidden under a veneer of politeness. One friend told me that people became more open to him when they learnt that he was neither American nor British but Irish.
- ✓ Conversely this encourages the ministry of non-Western Christians.
- ✓ There must be great opportunities for ministry in the areas of post-trauma and counselling. Be aware too of second generation effects, especially in countries such as Lebanon and Sudan where there were long periods of conflict. Consider Lebanon for a moment. The civil war began in 1975 meaning that anyone born after 1971 has little, if any, memory of Lebanon as it was before the war. They are likely to be carrying the effects of trauma within their beings, either directly having lived through the war or indirectly because their parents are so affected.
- ✓ There is greater need for openness, accountability and clear handling of money.

### **Comparison with Rest of the World**

Many parts of the world have been affected by super-power politics and involvement in local affairs. However, the Middle East is so affected to a greater extent than anywhere else.

The Economist argued in its *World in 2005* that the amount of armed conflict in the world as a whole was decreasing, mainly it carefully noted because there were fewer wars in Africa. Such a trend is to be welcomed, though I note that the Economist tends to take an optimistic view on such matters. Across the region under consideration, conflict seems not to be lessening.

Sunni versus Shi'ite violence has been seen elsewhere, notably in Pakistan. One asks whether such violence will be seen in the Middle East, or more accurately will be seen elsewhere given the element of Sunni versus Shi'ite seen in central Iraq. There is tension in Bahrain, where there is a Shi'ite majority yet the Sunnis hold the political and economic power. At deeper levels there is tension within Saudi Arabia where the significant Shi'ite minority is oppressed. As noted above, intra-Muslim violence can be beneficial to the spread of the Gospel; it aids the *best of times*.

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<sup>13</sup> *A Handbook on Counter-Terrorism Measures: what US Non-profits and Grantmakers Need to Know*; by Day, Berry & Howard Foundation on behalf of the Independent Sector ([www.independentsector.org](http://www.independentsector.org)), InterAction ([www.interaction.org](http://www.interaction.org)) and Council on Foundations ([www.cof.org](http://www.cof.org))



## ***Effect on Persecution***

As noted, violence and extremism are generally bad for Human Rights in general, and anything that is bad for human rights tends to have a disproportional affect on minorities, which in this region includes the Christians.

In parts of Iraq, Christians have been seen as an easy target for three reasons. First they are unlikely to respond violently. Second, they do not have a large tribe protecting them. Third, they are perceived to have links with the West giving them access to money, making them more profitable victims of kidnapping-for-ransom activities.

As noted above, action can be taken against Christians, national or expatriate, to appease radical Islamic elements.

I have seen one example of a mission worker losing his residency permit in which lack of transparency over financial support (either actual or perceived) was one key issue in the eyes of the authorities.

Visas for Christian workers may become more difficult. Historically, we have seen indigenous churches grow strongly after all, or most, missionaries are removed. Examples include Algeria, Iran after the 1979 revolution, and, in other regions, Bangladesh and China. The worst of times for mission agencies led to the best of times for church growth!

## **Concluding Remarks**

Charles Dickens' novel *A Tale of Two Cities* begins with the line "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." I'd like to think that the next few years in the Middle East & North Africa might be likewise the best of times and the worst of times:

- The best, because the amount and pace of major change seems likely to create excellent opportunities for the spread of the Gospel, for the growth of the Church
- The worst, because the likely backlash will cause persecution

In some places, and Iran is an example, these two trends are already evident.

We live, move, have our being and minister in a rapidly changing world. Let us use the positive changes well to make these truly the best of times; let us support one another in the negative changes. And may we walk humbly with our God as we seek to act justly and love mercy in His name across His world.

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