

The Middle East: Cradle of Christianity, Place of Persecution

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Country/Region: Middle East and North Africa, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Jordan, Iraq, Holy Land, Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates



Jerusalem, where Jesus died and rose, is the birthplace of Christianity. Yet in much of the Middle East the Church is overshadowed by the power of Islam

The Middle East is seldom out of the headlines. For decades the region has been racked by wars and insurgencies, most recently in Iraq and the Holy Land. Fundamentalist forms of Islam in Saudi Arabia and Iran are growing in strength and influence well beyond the borders of these nations. Autocratic governments severely restrict political freedoms even in more secular countries such as Egypt and Syria. And the economic importance of the area, with its vast oil resources, gives Western governments a major stake in its stability and development.

Caught in the midst of these swirling currents are a number of large but vulnerable Christian communities. The Middle East is the birthplace of Jesus Christ and the Christian faith, and it is home to many historic churches that pre-date the dominance of Islam in the region. Now, however, these Christians are facing multiple dangers, to the point that the very survival of Christianity in some countries is currently in serious doubt.

This Regional Profile sketches the conditions endured by Christians in each part of the Middle East. As we shall see, whilst some of their sufferings and persecutions are common to them all, many national churches also face problems specific to their own contexts. The countries are discussed according to the size of their Christian communities, beginning with those where Christians are a tiny minority.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia follows a puritanical version of Islam known as Wahhabism, which it propagates vigorously all over the world with the help of oil money. The government asserts that none of the country's citizens are Christians. This claim is untrue, but the small number of Saudi Christians are mostly secret believers. In 2009 the authorities detained a blogger, Hamoud Bin Saleh, merely for writing about his conversion to Christianity on his own website. Saudi law is based on Islamic sharia, and it prescribes the death sentence for converts from Islam. Public Christian worship is forbidden, even for the large expatriate community, and Christians may be detained, assaulted or deported for meeting to pray together even in private.

Yemen

Yemen's Christian population numbers only some 3,000 among a population of more than 20 million. Most of these are expatriates, and the very few Yemeni believers have to practise their faith secretly for fear of severe reprisals. Yemen too has made apostasy from Islam legally punishable by death, although there are no reports of any executions in recent years. Converts to Christianity do however face arrest and torture by the notorious Political Security Office, and the possibility of extra-judicial killing. Expatriate Christians are generally free to worship, but evangelism among Muslims is illegal, and those suspected of it are in grave danger. In June 2009 three Christian students from overseas Bible and mission schools who were visiting Yemen to do humanitarian work were kidnapped and murdered. Six other people (including three small children) abducted at the same time are still missing at the time of writing.

Gulf States

The Gulf States of Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates have sizeable expatriate churches, and these are mostly allowed to practise their faith quite freely. But again, sharing the Gospel with Muslims is forbidden, and the indigenous Christian communities are very small and have to operate mainly in secret. In all five countries Islam is the state religion, and in Bahrain all citizens are defined as Muslim. However, Islam takes a more conservative and repressive form in some states, such as Qatar, where apostasy is technically a capital offence punishable by death (although since the country's independence in 1971 there have been no reports of converts' being punished), than in others, such as Kuwait. Restrictions are imposed by governments on the number of visas available to pastors visiting from overseas and the size of worship venues.

Holy Land

First -Century Persecution in the Middle East

According to Matthew's Gospel, Jesus Himself was born into persecution, and He had to immediately become a refugee from the country of His birth (Matt. 2:13-23), fleeing with his parents from Judea to Egypt. Similarly the earliest followers of Jesus suffered at the hands of the authorities. Acts recounts

Christians living in the Holy Land have the longest Christian heritage in the world, but their numbers are now decreasing rapidly. In the Palestinian Territories they live amidst anarchy and lawlessness and face discrimination and persecution from the Muslim majority. The seizure and burning of property, and even physical violence, are not uncommon. In Israel Christians, especially Messianic Jews, suffer hostility from extreme

the persecution of Peter and John (4:1-21), all the apostles (5:17-42) and Stephen and the Jerusalem church (6:8 – 8:3). Such persecution is still alarmingly common. The Gospels also indicate that Jesus faced physical danger when teaching the Scriptures (Luke 4:14-30) and suffered rejection by His own family when beginning His ministry (Mark 3:21). These experiences continue to be familiar to Christians in their homes and communities in the Middle East today.

Orthodox Jewish groups. One of these has recently organised repeated protests outside the homes of two Christian pastors, sometimes slashing tyres, destroying property or attacking visitors, and demanding that the men stop evangelising among Jewish people. The rise to power in Gaza of the militant Islamist group Hamas is a further threat to Christians' safety. Even where they are not in immediate physical danger, they may be subject to severe restrictions on their movements as a result of the prolonged conflict.

Jordan

Jordan is home to an estimated 190,000 Christians who are full citizens of the country, and also to at least 37,000 who have fled there from neighbouring Iraq. It has a Biblical heritage extending to the time of the patriarchs, covering territory once held by the ancient kingdoms of Edom, Moab and Ammon and by the Israelite tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh. Christianity is a recognised religion, but Christians face some pressures. According to the US Department of State, "The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, on condition that religious practices are consistent with 'public order and morality,' however, the Government [has] continued to impose restrictions on this right." Sharing one's Christian faith with Muslims is prohibited, and converts from Islam face ostracism and the loss of their civil rights. For example, Mohammad Abbad had to flee the country in 2008 before a court could annul his marriage and challenge his custody of his children; in his absence he was found guilty of apostasy. In recent years many foreign Christian workers have been deported because of their preaching and missionary activities, and the percentage of Christians in the population is declining steeply.

Iraq

Since the Gulf War in 1990-91 Christians in Iraq have suffered in savage outbreaks of anti-Christian violence, and these have intensified since the invasion of 2003. Islamic extremists are trying to "cleanse" the country of all its Christians, using threats, bombings, kidnappings and killings. In just three days in July 2009 seven churches in Baghdad and Mosul were bombed, four people killed and thirty wounded. As a result of this persecution the Christian population of Iraq has declined from 1.5 million in 1990 to perhaps as low as 400,000 today, as huge numbers have fled to neighbouring countries. Many of those who remain have been displaced from their homes and have gone to more stable parts of the country. Promises by the Iraqi government to protect the Christians and safeguard their rights are as yet unfulfilled.



An Iraqi Christian family whom Barnabas has assisted with food aid

Kidnapping and murder in northern Iraq

Imad Elias Abdul Karim, a 55-year-old Christian nurse from Kirkuk in northern Iraq, was abducted from outside his home on 3 October 2009. As he went to his car three people shot and wounded him before seizing him and disappearing without trace. On the evening of the next day the police found his body on a road outside the city. A local official, Risq Aziz, also a Christian, had previously been murdered with two other women in the same place. An initial medical report on Karim testified to "obvious signs of torture". The kidnappings and killings of Christians in Kirkuk have generated a climate of fear. "The government does nothing," said a local Christian, "and Christians have become an easy target."

Lebanon

In Lebanon the proportion of Christians in the population is the highest in the Middle East, at some 34%, but this figure reflects a major decline from more than 50% in the 1970s. A higher birth rate among the Muslim community, and the emigration of Christians due to several wars and fears for the future of their country and the region in the face of a resurgent Islam, have combined to depress the figure. Lebanese Christians believe that the influence that they have traditionally wielded is waning, as an increasing number of crucial political positions are being given to Muslims. Being fewer in number the churches are now less able to neutralise the political influence of Islamist extremism, most notably that of the militant group Hezbollah, which is based in Lebanon, and some leaders fear that the country is in danger of becoming thoroughly Islamised.



Syria

It is easier to be a Christian in Syria than anywhere else in the Arab world. The churches are not only strong in numbers (some 10% of the population), but also safe and stable. The Muslim majority shows Christians an unusual degree of respect, and the secular Baathist government grants them a good measure of religious freedom. It even provides free electricity for churches, just as for



Children at a Christian school in Syria supported by Barnabas

mosques. In 1915 Syria welcomed huge numbers of Christians fleeing from the Armenian genocide, and its hospitality is being extended in the present to numerous Iraqi Christian refugees. Syrian state education also provides classes on Christianity for Christian students. But the law forbids conversion from Islam to Christianity. Another law, which prohibits “posing a threat to the relations among religious groups”, discourages evangelism among Muslims. Converts may be in danger from their families and communities.

Egypt

The Christian population in Egypt is very large – estimates vary from six to nine million people, between 8 and 12% of the population – but they have a difficult relationship with the Muslim majority. Christians experience discrimination in education, employment and the courts, and harassment in daily life. Although there used to be many prosperous Egyptian Christians, most of them have now emigrated, and the majority of the remaining Christian community live in extreme poverty. Those in rural areas are vulnerable to violence, and the police seldom try to protect them from it. Permission for the construction and repair of church buildings is hard to obtain, and there are often violent attacks on church building projects. The many incidents of anti-Christian brutality, and of kidnapping and forced conversion of Christian women, are rarely followed by successful prosecutions. Converts from Islam to Christianity are especially vulnerable to hostility, and they cannot have their new faith recorded on their identity cards. This causes serious problems to them and their children, who are also registered as Muslims.



Many Christians in Egypt are so poor that they have to live and work in the garbage cities

Abduction and forced conversion in Egypt

In 2009 the 19-year-old daughter of an Egyptian Christian accountant was kidnapped and then forced to convert to Islam and marry a Muslim. On 30 September she called her father, Gamal Labib Hanna, and begged him to come and save her from her husband. He went with relatives and a family friend, Rifaat Girges Habib, to the apartment where she was being held and released her. But later Habib's shop was completely demolished by the police, and a group of his relatives were severely assaulted in front of their neighbours. The girl's uncles were forced to bring her to a police station, where she was handed over to her father-in-law, and Habib's family were detained until he turned himself in.

This snapshot of Christian life in the Middle East shows that the churches have needs that must be addressed urgently if Christianity is to survive and thrive there. Yet the Good News remains as true today as it was when Christianity was born in the region nearly 2,000 years ago, and all things are still possible with God (Mark 10:27). Among the signs of hope in the region are an increasing number of converts from Islam to Christ. Please pray for Christians in the various countries, that they may remain faithful to the Lord in the midst of their trials and know His wisdom in responding to them.

Aid from Barnabas to the Middle East

Barnabas is working to improve the lives of suffering and persecuted Middle Eastern Christians. Thank you so much for your prayers and generosity that make it possible for us to support our brothers and sisters in need.

Among the many projects supported by Barnabas in the Middle East are the following:

- Food and other basic necessities for Iraqi Christians displaced within Iraq or refugees in neighbouring countries. Food parcels, distributed through local churches, enable the poorest families to survive (project reference 20-246 for Iraq and 20-383 for neighbouring countries). We also fund training in skills that will help them get work to support themselves and help with small business start-up costs.
- Help for Christians in Egypt whose pigs were culled. Many Christians lost their livelihood when the Egyptian authorities ordered the slaughter of 300,000 pigs because of swine flu in April 2009. The project provides alternative ways for Christian families to earn a living. (Project reference 11-819)
- Sponsorship for Christian school children in Bethlehem. This project contributes to the running costs of a Christian school in Bethlehem so that it never has to turn away a child from a Christian background, even when the parents are too poor to pay more than minimal fees. (Project reference 65-420)
- Christian TV and video. To strengthen the faith of Christians and to counteract the strongly negative image of Christians in the Arab media, a Christian ministry makes programmes for video and broadcast. Viewers' letters testify to the encouragement that the programmes bring, especially to converts from Islam. (Project reference XX-

