

The Middle East situation and its effects on Christians and Israel

The “Arab Spring”

The so-called Arab Spring was a remarkable series of events including the following:

December 2010	Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor set himself on fire because the authorities had confiscated his produce. This was the culmination of many years of such maltreatment and it sparked protests in Tunisia and elsewhere, including Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Oman, Syria and Yemen.
January 2011	The Tunisian President fled to Saudi Arabia. A few days later protests in Egypt forced the Egyptian President to resign.
March 2011	Protests against President Assad began in Syria leading to a prolonged war with many atrocities.
October 2011	Libyan President Gaddafi was killed after a 9-month conflict.
February 2012	The President of Yemen resigned after protests.
June 2012	Mohammed Morsi of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood was elected President of Egypt.
July 2013	Millions of Egyptians demonstrated against Morsi forcing his resignation.
May 2014	Former army chief Abdel Fatah al-Sisi was elected President of Egypt

Many people saw all this as a positive revolution which would establish democracy in the Middle East. But it was not to be. Instead, there were many sinister developments. One early example happened in August 2013 when Muslims set fire to over 70 Christian churches in Egypt. Since then extreme Islamists have come to the fore, especially in Iraq, Syria and Libya. The most prominent is, of course, the so-called Islamic State (Isis). The removal of dictators has opened the way to far more extreme leadership taking over. This had happened much earlier when the Shah of Persia (Iran) was overthrown in 1979 and replaced by hard-line Islamists. On June 29th 2014 Isis announced that it had re-established the Islamic Caliphate (global Islamic state) led by the Caliph Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi. One Iraqi politician said that the Arab Spring had become an Islamic Spring.

International chaos in the Middle East

Isis seems to be aiming at weakening Arab states and their armies so that it will be able to gain more influence and make it easier to ‘liberate’ the Palestinians from Israeli control. Turkey, Iran and Israel are the only strong states in the Middle East.

Syria and Iraq

Syria and Iraq are, of course, deeply divided and largely ungovernable. They are well on the way to becoming failed states. Isis (which stands for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) is now in control of more than half of Syria and controls all the border crossings between Syria and Iraq. Their intermediate aim is a Middle East Islamic state which includes the territories of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Israel. Syria is crucially important for Isis because they see it as the heart of the Islamic State on the border of Palestine. They see it as the road to Jerusalem. Isis is known to have some chemical weapons but there is fear that they will gain more from Syrian sources. Israel is afraid that Hezbollah, the Islamist group based in Lebanon, also could get hold of Syrian chemical weapons and smuggle them into Lebanon. Some experts are afraid that people could be exposed to biological weapons such as anthrax, plague, and cholera which could cause pandemics that are very difficult to control.

Iraq is divided between a Shia Muslim majority and a more traditional Sunni minority. But Isis (which is Sunni

extremist) also holds large areas of the country and at times the Iraqi army has shown it is not up to withstanding it.

Egypt

Egypt initially accepted 300,000 Syrian refugees but since Morsi was deposed has turned against them. President Sisi is authoritarian and there have been unfair trials and an increasing number of executions. Morsi has been sentenced to death and the Muslim Brotherhood has been outlawed.

Militant Islamists have mounted attacks particularly in North Sinai. Hundreds of police and soldiers have been killed. One terrorist group called Sinai Province has links with Isis.

Egypt receives financial support from the Saudis and the Emirates. It is regarded as supporting Israel against Hamas in Gaza which is seen as a terrorist group.

Iran

Iran is an oppressive regime which restricts human rights. It is strongly opposed by the Saudis and the Gulf States. It co-operates with Hezbollah in Lebanon to support President Assad of Syria. The US is, of course, seeking to ensure that Iran cannot develop nuclear weapons. President Obama stated in April 2015 that Iran will accept “the most robust and intrusive inspections and transparency regime ever negotiated for any nuclear programme in history. If Iran cheats, the world will know it. This deal is not based on trust. It’s based on unprecedented verification.” However Israel is very suspicious of the agreement and believes Iran will not keep to it. Clearly the Saudis share this suspicion.

Jordan

Jordan has received 600,000 Syrian refugees. This, together with the surrounding chaos in Iraq and Syria is creating a serious crisis in Jordan and fears that the conflict could spill over into its territory.

Kuwait

Kuwait is an oppressive regime which curtails freedom of speech. David Cohen, Deputy Director of the CIA, once described Kuwait as the “epicentre of fundraising for terrorist groups in Syria” However Kuwait is regarded as an important ally by the West.

Lebanon

Lebanon has suffered by being caught up in battles between countries such as Iran, Syria and Saudi Arabia and it fears that the Syrian conflict could spill over into its territory. Fears are also raised by the strong connections between Iran and Hezbollah, which is based in Lebanon and is regarded by many as a terrorist group.

It is a country where citizenship is only available to members of one of 18 approved religious groups. Power is shared out between these groups and, especially in the context of a weak state, this leads to an acceptance of compromise.

Lebanon has one million Syrian refugees, the equivalent of one fifth of the Lebanese population. The presence of the pro-Assad Shia group Hezbollah in the country has caused violent reactions from the Sunni community

Libya

Since 2014 there has been civil war in Libya. Central government has collapsed and the numerous militias are out of control. The country is moving towards being a failed state. Libya is very dangerous and journalists tend not to go there. Isis has moved into territory which is not controlled by the state and set up training centres for extremists. It was from there that the recent massacre in Tunisia was mounted.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is dominated by Wahhabism, a very strict version of Sunni Islam. It is repressive and carries out severe punishments, including many beheadings. No political parties are allowed. The Saudis, assisted by Qatar, Kuwait and United Arab Emirates have funded Sunni rebels in Syria and Iraq. However Saudi Arabia has 25% of the world’s oil supplies so western governments want to maintain good relationships with the country despite its bad human rights record. Hence Saudi Arabia has recently hosted a conference on Human Rights run by the UN Human Rights Council. The country is also the British arms industry’s largest customer.

Although the Saudis have funded Islamic fundamentalists around the region, it has now rebounded on them as extremist groups are threatening the Saudi leadership. They are also very threatened by the extensive influence of Iran in the Middle East, especially in Iraq. They have made it clear that if the US is not successful in preventing Iran developing nuclear weapons they will acquire them too. It is thought that the Saudis funded 60% of the development of the Pakistan nuclear weapons on the basis that they would be allowed to obtain some of those weapons if necessary. Saudi Prince Turki bin Faisal has said: "Whatever the Iranians have, we will have, too."

Tunisia

Many Tunisians have joined Isis to fight in Syria and Iraq.

Turkey

Anxieties in Turkey about growing Islamisation and the authoritarianism of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the prime minister led to riots and in 2015 Erdogan did not do too well in the election.

Turkey is very concerned to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish state by both Syrian and Turkish Kurds. They are sending troops to fight against the Syrian Kurds. The Turkish Kurds live in SE Turkey.

Turkey has accepted 1.8 million Syrian refugees.

Yemen

There has been an undeclared civil war in Yemen for some time. Iranian-backed rebels gained control of government institutions. The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait is close, not least because about half the Saudi army is of Kuwaiti origin. The Saudis are afraid of the Iranian influence in Yemen and they are also afraid that Kuwait will become a failed state controlled by terrorists. So in 2015 a Sunni Muslim coalition of nine Arab countries plus Pakistan invaded Kuwait.

Summary

Much of the conflict in the Middle East is between the more traditional Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims. They are at war with each other in Iraq, Syria and Kuwait. Isis is an extreme form of Sunni Islam.

Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen are torn by war. They are becoming failed states. Egypt is facing serious division. Saudi Arabia is an oppressive, anti-Christian regime. Jordan and Lebanon feel threatened and Turkey intends to prevent the Kurds establishing a state by violence if necessary.

In March 2015 a joint Arab military force was set up to face the unstable situation in the Middle East. The 22 states involved in the Arab League are to combine forces.

Many refugees have fled to Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Other refugees are crossing the Mediterranean to find safety in Europe - causing problems within the EU.

The effects on Christians

One thing that complicates the position of Christians in Muslim countries is military action by western nations which are seen as Christian nations. Consequently, Muslim countries persecute Christians. The Arab Spring and the growth of Isis has led to much greater oppression of Christians in the Middle East.

In Egypt, where there is a long-established Christian community, the removal of President Morsi in 2013 led to the worst persecution of Christians in 1400 years. It was against Coptic Christians and 65 churches, Christian bookshops, schools and convents were burned down, looted or destroyed. There has been some similar persecution since then.

In recent years in Syria over 450,000 Christians have fled and hundreds of thousands are in hiding. Christians and Christian leaders have been abducted, ransomed or executed.

Since the 2003 Gulf War over a million Christians have fled from Iraq. In 2014 when Isis captured Mosul and much of the traditional Christian area around Nineveh 200,000 Christians fled to Kurdistan.

The chaos in Libya has meant that persecution has increased, with Christians being afraid to meet together. The only religious gatherings allowed are Islamic. Isis has executed Christians.

Saudi Arabia officially bans churches and Christian meetings, even amongst ex-pats. Sometimes the authorities take

oppressive action to enforce this ban against Christians meeting in homes. Bibles are prohibited. Converts from Islam to Christianity face the death penalty. Nevertheless for economic and political reasons the Saudis are treated as respected allies by western countries.

The Israeli perspective

I write as a friend of Israel but I am a genuine friend who, unlike some Zionist Christians, faces up to her failings as well as defending her when appropriate. She is not treating the Palestinians justly and currently she is becoming increasingly isolated in the world through the unwise leadership of her present government.

However, some of the criticism of Israel is unjust and there is some which is based on thinly veiled anti-Semitism. In fact, some Christians have decided that Israel is in the wrong and don't wish to be confused by the facts. There is a growing movement to boycott Israeli goods but, as Israel points out, there is no such boycott of other countries deemed to be guilty of injustice – Saudi Arabia, for example. It is essential that we seek to look at the world through Israeli eyes, as well as through Palestinian eyes.

Israel is still affected by centuries of persecution and the trauma of the Holocaust. She also knows that a large number of people dispute her legitimacy and would like to see her destroyed. Against that background she looks at the chaos in the Middle East around her – the extreme Islamism, the wars, the advance of Isis (which is now speaking of taking over from Hamas and 'liberating' Palestine), the threat of Iran, which wants Israel destroyed, gaining nuclear weapons after all (which is perceived as possible by the Israelis and others) and the danger the Saudis would follow suit. Yes, Israel should provide justice for the Palestinians but she also needs to protect herself. After all, Isis is getting too close for comfort.

It is all very well for the Christian armchair critics in the West to be calling for justice for the Palestinians. But they must also take the fears of the Israelis seriously. Yes, of course, sometimes politicians over-emphasise threats for political reasons but the fact is that Israel is seriously threatened – and things will get worse.

We need to pray for the countries of the Middle East, for Israel and for Christians in that region facing grave difficulties, persecution and violent death. We should also recognise that the growing persecution of Christians and the increasing threats to Israel are in harmony with the New Testament's teaching on the End Times.

Pray

1. That God will curb the power of extreme Islamists such as Isis and bring peace with justice to war-torn Middle East countries.
2. That God will protect Christians in the Middle East facing persecution.
3. That God will protect Israel from those seeking to harm or destroy her and cause her to act justly towards the Palestinians.

Other comment which may be of interest

Sir Jonathan Evans ex-boss of MI5 warns the planned UK Counter-Extremism Bill could be used against "harmless evangelical street preachers." See <http://christianteaching.org.uk/blog/eschatology/ex-mi5-boss-warns-counter-extremism-bill-could-be-used-against-christians/>

David Cameron doesn't understand religion [*he thinks religious doctrine is subject to secular law*]. See <http://christianteaching.org.uk/blog/secularisation/david-cameron-doesnt-understand-religion/>

Belfast Pastor to be prosecuted for saying Islam is Satanic. See <http://christianteaching.org.uk/blog/oppression-of-christians/belfast-pastor-to-be-prosecuted-for-saying-islam-is-satanic/>

Thank God for this Muslim leader's comment [*in support of the Belfast Pastor*]. See <http://christianteaching.org.uk/blog/interfaith/thank-god-for-this-muslim-leaders-comments/>

See the Maranatha Network brief daily meditation on the Return of Christ for each day of the month at <http://www.christianteaching.org.uk/Maranatha%20Network.html>