

The Underground Revival in the Middle East That Might Take Down Islam

The churning, tempestuous world looks remarkably different than many imagine. This is undoubtedly true if you're an average American.

In the darkest corners of the Middle East there's a revival beginning that's unprecedented in the history of world missions. I've previously reflected on it [here](#) and [here](#), but I wanted to take this amazing story further than before.

I hope that you'll journey with me as I explore unbelievable developments in the expansion of Christianity in the Middle East.

Reliable reports suggest more Muslims have become followers of Jesus over the last two decades than in Islam's combined 1,500-year history. Based on the accounts of several missiologists, it has been surmised that *"more Muslims have committed to follow Christ in the last 10 years than in the last 15 centuries of Islam."*[1] In spite of great difficulty and turmoil, Christianity is unquestionably expanding throughout Islamic world. God is up to something amazing in a region that many have thought was unreachable.

Rosenberg's Insights Into the Middle-Eastern Revival

✖ Joel Rosenberg, an evangelical researcher, author and resident of Israel has documented the recent upsurge of Christianity in the Middle-East. Through first-hand reconnaissance, coupled with reports from Arabic nationals, Rosenberg demonstrates that Christianity is rising rapidly in the world of Islam.

Admittedly some of the following statistics have shifted in the aftermath of the ISIS and other violent demonstrations against Christians. Those who follow Jesus have been slaughtered and have experienced severe persecution in this region. Nevertheless, Joel Rosenberg's observations provide a window into many amazing developments.

Some of the particulars can certainly be debated, but in many of the Mediterranean nations, Christianity is making extraordinary inroads. Though the subsequent conversion figures are impossible to confirm, even in their imprecision, they provide a snapshot of what's transpiring in the Middle East.

Sudan

A number of reports suggest that increasing numbers of Christ-followers are emerging in the brutal, war-torn nation of Sudan. Here, in the Nile river valley—along the Islamic strongholds of Northern Africa—it is being noted that:

“One million Sudanese have turned to Christ since the year 2000—not in spite of persecution, war and genocide, but because of them ... the estimated total number of believers in the country is more than 5.5 million.”[2]

Many are convinced that the great brutalities that this nation has encountered are becoming a catalyst for the expansion and growth of Christianity. Rather than inhibiting the church, the war is actually propelling it.

Pakistan

Pakistan is typically not identified as a nation experiencing a move of God, but apparently they're beginning to see one spark within their contentious borders. Christianity's Middle-Eastern expansion is particularly evident in this unexpected place. Rosenberg acknowledges that:

“Senior Pakistani Christian leaders tell me there is a ‘conversion explosion’ going on in their are now an estimated 2.5 million to 3 million born-again Pakistani believers worshiping Jesus Christ. Whole towns and villages along the Afghan-Pakistani border are ... converting to Christianity.”[3]

This Islamic country is not alone, many others in this region are having similar things take place.

Egypt

Reliable reports suggest that there is also a great revival erupting in the land of Egypt. Rosenberg declares that, “Ministry leaders in Egypt estimate there are more than 2.5 million followers of Jesus Christ in their country. Many of these are Muslim converts.”[4]

Undoubtedly, the severe persecutions and disruptions related to the “Arab Spring” have affected the lives of Christians throughout this nation, but the faithful have remained strong. Martyrdom invites outsiders to examine the claims of those willing to die for Jesus. It is believed that many amazing things are taking place in Egypt.

Iran

Surprisingly, the contentious nation of Iran is also beginning to encounter the rising flames of awakening. Violent Islamic Fundamentalism has not been able to impede the advancement of the gospel in this fierce Persian nation. Reflecting on this reality, Rosenberg writes,

“At the time of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, there were only about five hundred known Muslim converts to Jesus inside the country. By 2000, a survey of Christian demographic trends reported that there were two hundred twenty thousand Christians inside Iran, of which between four and twenty thousand were Muslim converts. And according to Iranian

Christian leaders I interviewed, the number of Christ-followers inside their country shot dramatically higher between 2000 and 2008.”[5]

Yes, you read that right. Christianity went from 500 people to 220,000 in 21 years. Contrary to what many Americans think, Christianity is quietly advancing behind the scenes in some of the most unlikely places around the globe.

Saudi Arabia

Reports continue to come in. A strikingly similar stirring is also taking place in Saudi Arabia—unquestionably the epicenter of world Islam. One wouldn’t expect the growth of Christianity in Mecca, but it is happening. Summarizing some of what he has heard, Joel Rosenberg reports that “Arab Christian leaders estimated there were more than one hundred thousand Saudi Muslim background believers in 2005, and they believe the numbers are even higher today.”[6] Saudi Arabia is being quickened by the Spirit of the Lord. It seems to be positioned to experience significant growth in the decades to come.

Iraq

Christianity is also quietly advancing in the turbulent nation of Iraq. Again, it needs to be noted that these numbers precede the vicious emergence of ISIS and the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Multitudes of Christians have been martyred since these figures were originally reported. Yet, even the fact that Muslims felt compelled to quell its advancement suggests that Christianity’s influence has been growing.

“Before 2003, senior Iraqi Christian leaders tell me, there were only about four to six hundred known born-again followers of Jesus Christ in the entire country, despite an estimated seven hundred fifty thousand nominal Christians in historic Iraqi churches. By the end of 2008, Iraqi Christian leaders estimated that there were more than seventy thousand

born-again Iraqi believers.”[7]

As many are aware, the expansion of Christianity has been greatly hindered more recently in Iraq. Don't be mistaken, this martyrdom and brutality will ultimately give way to more Christians in the land once known as Babylon.

Algeria

The whole Islamic world is currently shaking. We have already discussed some of the amazing advancements that are taking place in several of Arabic nations. These are where the greatest signs of revival are evident. Nevertheless, on a lesser level, other Islamic nations are also experiencing a tremendous stirring within their borders. One of these is Algeria. Rosenberg recounts the recent upsurge in Algeria, noting that:

“More than eighty thousand Muslims have become followers of Christ in recent years. ... The surge of Christianity has become so alarming to Islamic clerics that in March of 2006, Algerian officials passed a law banning Muslims from becoming Christians or even learning about Christianity, and forbidding Christians from meeting together without a license from the government.”[8]

Algeria is beginning to come alive with the gospel like much of Northern Africa.

Jordan

Another ancient Middle-Eastern locale where Christianity is beginning to take root is along the borders the eastern bank of the Jordan River. The Islamic land of Jordan is also experiencing the grace and wonder of Jesus. Reflecting on what is transpiring in this nation, Rosenberg noted the following:

“God has been reviving the Jordanian Church in the last four decades, and particularly in the past few years. Conservative estimates say the number of believers in the country is now between five and ten thousand. The head of one major Jordanian ministry, however, believes there may be as many as fifty thousand believers in the country.”[9]

Jordan is also experiencing the salvation of Jesus Christ.

Other Islamic Nations

Almost every Islamic nation has been experiencing a significant upsurge of Christianity over the last 20 years. Though the numbers aren't equally high, all are experiencing the impact on some level. Here are some of the other reports.

While in the nation of Morocco it has been claimed that “between 20,000 and 40,000 Muslims have become Christ-followers.”[10] Rosenberg suggests that, “The number of Afghan believers is now between 20,000 and 30,000.”[11] In Kazakhstan “there are more than fifteen thousand Kazakh Christians, and more than one hundred thousand Christians of all ethnicities.”[12] Reflecting on Lebanon, Rosenberg suggests that, “there are about ten thousand truly born-again followers of Jesus Christ today.”[13] Reports suggest there were no Muslim background Christians in Syria fifty years ago, but today “there are between four and five thousand born-again believers in the country.”[14]

Rosenberg's figures suggest that there are over 13 million Christians in Islamic countries, and a majority of them are from a Muslim background.

Other Observers

We find that Joel Rosenberg isn't the only one observing the changing conditions within the broader Islamic world. There are other evidences of a notable transformation taking place.

For example, journalist George Thomas notes that:

“A Christian revival is touching the northernmost reaches of Africa. In a region once hostile to the gospel, now tens of thousands of Muslims are following Jesus. As the sun sets over the Mediterranean Sea, Muslims across Northern Africa are converting to faith in Jesus Christ in record numbers. ... What experts say is that there is a profound move of God in the predominantly Muslim nations of Mauritania, Western Sahara, Morocco, Algeria, Libya and Tunisia.”[15]

Tino Qahoush, a researcher and filmmaker, has been traveling to various parts of this region to document the Christian revival that has been taking place. Reflecting on what he observed, he noted the following,

“What God is doing in North Africa, all the way from actually Mauritanian to Libya is unprecedented in the history of missions. I have the privilege of recording testimonies and listening to firsthand stories of men and women, of all ages.”[16]

Jayson Casper, a journalist with *Christianity Today*, also pointed out some astounding growth that’s taking place in the Arabian Peninsula. He writes:

“Today the Pew Research Center numbers Christians in the Arabian Peninsula at 2.3 million—more Christians than nearly 100 countries can claim. The Gulf Christian Fellowship, an umbrella group, estimates 3.5 million. ... United Arab Emirates Christian population ... [is] 13 percent, according to Pew. Among other Gulf states, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar each about 14 percent Christian, while Oman is about 6 percent. Even Saudi Arabia, home to Islam’s holiest cities (Mecca and Medina), is 4 percent Christian.”[17]

One of the best examples of the expansion of Christianity

within Muslim lands is through the work of Heidi and Roland Baker. Along with their church plants and trained workers from Iris Ministries, the Bakers have made an extraordinary impact on the brutal nation of Mozambique. The province that they currently operate in was entirely Muslim before their arrival, but a little over 10 years later those figures have changed drastically. Kelly Head from Christ for the Nations writes,

“The Bakers are now based full-time in Pemba, Mozambique, in an area where Heidi says was once called a ‘graveyard to missionaries.’ But recently the government announced publicly that it’s no longer a Muslim providence; now it’s a Christian providence.”[18]

The abrupt changes to the once Muslim Africa are something even the Islamic clerics are beginning to acknowledge. In December 2001, Sheikh Ahmad al Qataani, the president of The Companions Lighthouse for the Science of Islamic Law in Libya, appeared on a live interview on Al-Jazeera satellite television. He declared the following:

“Islam used to represent, as you previously mentioned, Africa’s main religion, and there were 30 African languages that used to be written in Arabic script. The number of Muslims in Africa has diminished to 316 million, half of whom are Arabs in North Africa. So in the section of Africa that we are talking about, the non Arab section, the number of Muslims does not exceed 150 million people. When we realize that the entire population of Africa is one billion people, we see that the number of Muslims has diminished greatly from what it was in the beginning of the last century. ... As to how that happened, well, there are now 1.5 million churches whose congregations account for 46 million people. In every hour, 667 Muslims convert to Christianity. Every day, 16,000 Muslims convert to Christianity. Every year, 6 million Muslims convert to Christianity. These numbers are very large indeed.”[19]

It is obvious from these and other reports that Christianity is advancing. Yet, the question is: "Why?" Interestingly, it may have a lot to do with something many in the West would discount.

Why Is Christianity Finally Growing in the Middle East?

Throughout the Mediterranean world there's a high regard for dreams. They comprehend them the same way that individuals during the early biblical period did. Islam in particular, places a great value on nocturnal visions. Ever since Muhammad retreated to a cave in A.D. 610 and began to experience what he considered to be revelatory visions, Muslims have greatly valued impressions they may receive while they're asleep. Timothy Morgan notes that dreams are a "part of the reality of their world. Mohammad listened to dreams, and he gave Muslims the impression that God could speak through them. So they do listen to them, and they do talk about them." [20]

Tom Doyle, an evangelist, pastor and the E3 Partners Ministry Director for the Middle East and Central Asia noted the following:

"Outside of the Scriptures, Egyptian history records a significant amount of information about dreams and visions, many of which became determining factors in the overall direction of the nation. One archaeological find close to the Pyramids revealed that ancient Egyptian scribe named Kenhirkhopeshef kept a papyrus document called the Dream Book. The book is a catalog of 108 dreams and the activities and emotions that accompanied them." [21]

Interestingly, over the last two decades there have been numerous claims of Muslims having dreams about Jesus and ultimately coming to faith. Uri Scaramanga, writing in conservative evangelical journal, acknowledges that "stories of Muslims coming to faith in Christ because of a vision or dream are not uncommon." [22]

It is easy to dismiss this, but I think Christians should remain open to all of the various ways that God operates. It may seem inexplicable to us, but it seems that dreams are a primary way that Middle-Eastern people are open to encountering God. Reflecting on the significance of these nocturnal visions, Nabeel Qureshi writes:

“I think the reason why dreams are an important component of people leaving Islam and accepting Christ is that most Muslims believe that God reveals himself and his will to them in dreams. In fact, it seems to be the only way that they believe God will reveal his will to them. So they have faith that God will direct them, so God uses their faith for his purposes.”[23]

With all the questions and concerns about this approach, there's interest in determining to what extent dreams are driving evangelism among Muslims. Georges Houssney prepared a questionnaire and, over a period of three years, asked 100 Christian converts from Islam how they came to faith. When asked, “What was the major factor in drawing you to Christ?” 25 percent of Houssney's respondents acknowledged that dreams and visions were the primary catalyst that brought them to salvation. Furthermore, 60 percent of the respondents acknowledged that they had experienced a relevant dream or vision or both prior to their conversion.[24]

The reality of these transforming dreams are being widely acknowledged, even though they are a bit unsettling for those in the conservative evangelical community. Reflecting on his own experience, Tom Doyle says:

“I'm not a skeptic by nature. I'm actually known as a being fairly trusting. But when I began hearing about Muslims having dreams and visions of Jesus, I must say I was quite the doubting Thomas. I think it's because I have watched a few Christian television programs. ... About a decade ago,

those of us who work in Muslim outreach started to hear about something new in the world of Islam. God was opening the closed hearts of Muslims by giving them spectacular dreams and visions. At first, the stories were rare, but today these amazing accounts of God breaking through to Muslims have become a common occurrence. We find that about one out of every three Muslim-background believers has had a dream or vision prior to their salvation experience. Some more precise surveys are a bit more conservative and suggest a little over 25 percent of Muslims had a dream or a vision before becoming disciples of Jesus. Either way, the percentage is significant.” [25]

Though they may be misunderstood and largely outside the norm in the West, dreams are certainly changing things throughout the Arab world.

Testimonies of Former Muslims

Many Middle-Eastern Christians publicly acknowledge the fact that dreams actively facilitated them coming into a saving knowledge of Jesus. For example, Nabeel Qureshi is a former devout Muslim. He became a believer in part through a visionary experience. When recounting his conversion he writes:

“When I contrasted the evidence for Christianity against the evidence for Islam I knew that intellectually there was no comparison. So I asked God to reveal Himself to me in truth, through dreams and visions. All those things, combined with actually reading the Bible, are what drove me forward to the point of accepting Christ.”[26]

When asked about his conversion to Christianity from Islam, Pastor Naeem Fazal of Mosaic Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, mentioned several things that impacted him. He

pointed out things like friendship with a knowledgeable Christian as well as reading the Bible. However, it was a particular supernatural encounter that brought him into a moment of crisis. Having a visionary experience one night, Fazal had an encounter that forever shifted the course of his life.

“It looked like a figure made up with light—solid, yet transparent. It was an experience like no other. The peace I felt from this presence was so powerful, so aggressive ... and [He] introduced Himself to me and said, ‘I’m Jesus; your life is not your own.’ The next morning my life changed forever.”
[27]

Fazal acknowledges that he is not unique in this experience. He notes that “the majority of the [Muslim] conversion stories I hear seem to involve dreams and visions inspired by the Holy Spirit in which Christ is supernaturally revealed.”[28]

Dreams Seem to Fill in a Gap

Many are compelled to question this approach. As I already mentioned, this seems rather unorthodox, particularly within the American Evangelical context. However, dreams are unquestionably shifting awareness and opening the door for the gospel. In fact, it might be God’s way of counteracting the relative failure of Western missions in the Middle East.

Walid Shoebat agrees. He is a former PLO operative turned Christian and peace activist. Shoebat acknowledges that Jesus is compensating for the weaknesses of the Western Church. Reflecting on this, he noted the following:

“I had first doubted the countless stories of Muslims becoming Christian as a result of dreams until I met some of them and heard their testimonies. My conclusion to this phenomenon is that Christ succeeds where the church fails.”[29]

I believe that it's time for Christians to celebrate the advancement of the gospel in some of darkest places on the globe. In this season, Jesus is doing amazing things in the midst of every tribe and tongue. We are obliged to acknowledge the beauty and wonder of the kingdom's advancement.

Don't be mistaken; Christ succeeds where the church fails.

"Now a word was brought to me secretly, and my ear received a whisper of it. Amid disquieting thoughts from night visions, when deep sleep falls on mortals, terror and trembling came to me, which made all my bones shake. A breath of wind was passing before my face, and the hair on my body was standing up. It stood still, but I could not recognize its appearance; a form was in front of my eyes, there was stillness, then I heard a voice saying: 'Can a mortal be more righteous than God? Can a man be more pure than his Maker?'" (Job 4:12-17).

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[1] Audrey Lee. "Why Revival is Exploding Among Muslims." Charisma. December 2012.

[2] Joel C. Rosenberg. Inside the Revival: Good News and Changed Hearts Since 9/11. Tyndale Publishers, 2009, 6.

[3] Joel C. Rosenberg. Inside the Revival: Good News and Changed Hearts Since 9/11. Tyndale Publishers, 2009, 15-16.

[4] Joel C. Rosenberg. Inside the Revival: Good News and Changed Hearts Since 9/11. Tyndale Publishers, 2009, 5.

[5] Joel C. Rosenberg. Inside the Revival: Good News and Changed Hearts Since 9/11. Tyndale Publishers, 2009, 3.

[6] Joel C. Rosenberg. Inside the Revival: Good News and Changed Hearts Since 9/11. Tyndale Publishers, 2009, 13-14.

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- [19] Jayson Casper. "Why Christianity Is Surging In The Heart Of Islam." Christianity Today 59:7 (September 2015): 19.
- [20] Timothy C. Morgan; "Why Muslims Are Becoming the Best Evangelists: Missiologist Dave Garrison documents global surge in Muslims leading Muslims to Christ. He calls it, 'Unprecedented;'" Christianity Today; April 22, 2014.
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