

Saudi Arabia Declares Destruction of All Churches in Region

Earlier this month, news reports surfaced out of Saudi Arabia that raised the red flag for Christians.

Todd Nettleton, a spokesman for Voice of the Martyrs USA, says, "The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia—the top Islamic official in the country of Saudi Arabia—has declared that it is 'necessary to destroy all the churches of the region.'" Nettleton goes on to note that the report hasn't surfaced anywhere except on the Council on Foreign Relations Web site, which was then picked up by *The Atlantic*.

As Saudi Arabia is ranked second on the Open Doors World Watch List (a compilation of the 50 countries where persecution of Christians is most severe), the news is not really a surprise. There is no provision for religious freedom in the constitution of this Islamic kingdom.

All citizens must adhere to Islam, and conversion to another religion is punishable by death. Public Christian worship is forbidden; worshippers risk imprisonment, lashing, deportation and torture. Evangelizing Muslims and distributing non-Islamic materials is illegal. Muslims who convert to Christianity risk being subjected to honor killings, and foreign Christian workers have been exposed to abuse from employers.

Sheikh Abdul-Aziz ibn Abdullah, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, created an implication with his assertion. Nettleton explains, "This was in a meeting with Kuwaiti officials who came to Saudi Arabia. They were asking this Islamic official, 'What should we do about the churches?' His statement was, 'There should be no Christian churches on the Arabian Peninsula.'"

According to the report, the delegation wanted to confirm Shariah's position on churches. Essentially, Nettleton says, "If you have churches in Kuwait, which they do, they should be destroyed. The interesting thing about this is that there are no churches in Saudi Arabia. There are no church buildings that are allowed to exist there. So he clearly wasn't talking only for his own country. He was trying to export this ideology to the surrounding countries."

This proclamation could affect churches in Kuwait, Oman, Yemen, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Nettleton observes that "in most of these countries, we're not talking about a lot of churches; we're talking about a few that are allowed to exist primarily to serve foreigners that are living in that country."

However, the U.N. Human Rights Council has yet to take a stand on such blatant violations of freedom of religion. How the governments implement this declaration is yet to be determined.

"Most of these countries would consider their native population to be 100 percent Muslim," says Nettleton. "We could see more persecution. We could see churches closed or destroyed. We just kind of wait to see now."

The concern raised by this view has not escaped the notice of the U.S. government, though. The most recent International Religious Freedom report (annually issued by the State Department) remarks, "Freedom of religion is neither recognized nor protected under the law and is severely restricted in practice. ... The government officially does not permit non-Muslim clergy to enter the country to conduct religious services, although some do so under other auspices and are able to hold services. These entry restrictions make it difficult for non-Muslims to maintain regular contact with clergy. This is particularly problematic for Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians, whose faiths require that they

receive sacraments from a priest on a regular basis.”

For the most part, says Nettleton, the Mufti’s statement will be buried in the mainstream media. However, he’s encouraging believers to ask God to continue to intervene. There are Christ followers in Saudi Arabia who “take great risk to follow Jesus Christ,” he says. “They take great risk to even talk about their faith with another person. We can pray for God’s protection over them. We can pray for encouragement.”

What’s more, ask God to continue His intervention. While the Arabian Peninsula isn’t a place for the more traditional approach to sharing Christ’s story, there are still many who are encountering the gospel.

“Pray that Muslims will come to know Christ,” Nettleton says. “One of the things that’s happening, not only in Saudi Arabia but across the Middle East, is Muslims encountering Christ through dreams and visions and other supernatural ways.”