

Ministering Wisely in the Middle East: Christian Service Under Pressure

The Middle East is a vast and diverse area of the world. Its people are friendly and hospitable, and in most places life is beautiful, easy, meaningful, and tranquil. In other troubled areas, though, life is marked by tension, stress, conflicts, and hostility. The region has a wide variety of sub-cultures, norms, traditions, and customs. It is a place where ancient civilizations meet modern lifestyles. The Middle East serves as the gateway to three major continents. Its people are still rooted in the land, as they deeply cherish their traditions, values, faiths, and cultures. Most urban people operate well within the modern, Western lifestyle, without losing their cultural heritage or religious identity. Christian workers in the Middle East encounter many rewards and joys. At the same time, they face serious challenges and struggles. Depending on the situation and location, Christian service is limited and shaped by the surrounding circumstances, traditions, subcultures, social norms, and political climate.

Presently, the Christian presence in many quarters of the Middle East is being diminished and weakened. Unfortunately, as we enter the third millennium, the Christian communities are decreasing in number, in presence, and in influence. In some areas, serious persecution is taking place. These are alarming signs. Many church leaders, both in the East and in the West, are deeply concerned about these new developments. Many provinces, communities, and towns that were predominantly Christian in the recent past are now gradually losing ground and becoming equally mixed or predominantly non-Christian (mostly Muslim). There are numerous reasons for this current phenomenon, including political tension, economic hardship, civil unrest, and religious oppression.



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Understanding the social and historical context of the Middle East, along with the cultural and religious values of the people, is key to working effectively in this region. Pastors, missionaries, and national Christians must live wisely and righteously as they seek to shine the light of Christ, often in the midst of intense pressures.

They face serious struggles, and at times they may go through suffering and persecution, as the cases at the end recount.

Naji writes the first part of this chapter and Anneke the second part.

All of these factors are causing migration in large numbers, especially for those who can afford to leave. Migration is high among the young and educated, particularly those from unfortunate and less established communities.

Christian families are traditionally smaller, and many young adults opt to remain single, which is a little more acceptable within the Christian communities and in urban settings than in other places. In addition, there are scores of young priests and nuns who dedicate themselves to celibacy and ecclesiastical life (which means fewer offspring).

So, the Christian community and the Christian presence in the Middle East are shrinking! My (Naji's) homeland, Lebanon, for example, used to be predominantly a Christian nation, with about 85% Christians and the rest a mix of Druze and Muslims. Now the Christian community counts for about 35% and is declining.

Lebanon is as old as the biblical times. It was once prosperous and successful and a model of co-existence. It was a place where culture, education, ethnicity, religion, civilization, and political persuasion met and formed a successful democratic republic, manifesting a balanced harmony and healthy integration. The country was hospitable and free, modern in function, and open to the East, the West, and the international community. Currently, it has a rich variety of subcultures, socioeconomic classes, and traditions. Its population is about 3.5 million, with another 13 million Lebanese of all generations living outside the country.

Since Lebanon reflects the miniature Middle East and the gate to the Arabic and European worlds, most religious sects and subcultures are represented in it in some measure. The Maronite, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Eastern churches are all strong. Protestants are a minority. The Jews were established in many cities. But since the political turmoil started, the majority of Jews reluctantly migrated from Lebanon and neighboring countries, leaving behind their homes, Arabic heritage,

and synagogues. The Shiites are the larger Muslim group. They are, however, socially and economically less established than the Sunnis. The Arabic and old Middle Eastern way of life are still observed in villages and rural areas in the mountains, valleys, and deserts—less in Lebanon now and more in the surrounding countries.

All these dynamics, together with the rapid changes in the Middle East, are affecting the local churches and missionary work. Churches of all types are struggling to adjust and, at times, readjust over and over again to the new developments and emerging needs. They have to adapt quickly to new regimes, political systems, social trends, and religious realities. They have to change approaches, switch places, apply new labels, and carefully guard their ministries or else completely stop their activities. At times, they must sit and wait patiently until the dust settles down again after each turbulence. In vulnerable and changing areas of the Middle East, nothing is taken for granted.

Historically, the Middle East has been the birthplace of most civilizations and religions. There are several groups in the Arab world that are religiously radical (zealous to the cause of Islam as the only true religion) and politically angry (because of the invasion of Western imperialism and culture and also because of the presence of Israel and its behaviors in the region). Some individuals would fight anybody anywhere, using any means to press their ultimate cause. Some are paid or indoctrinated to do so, as is the case in any troubled spot in the world. However, the vast majority of the Arabic people are friendly, moderate, peaceful, God-fearing, and hospitable.

Although Christians are declining in influence both politically and financially in most areas of the Middle East and North Africa, they are gaining spiritually. There seems to be a kind of renewal and return to the fountains of faith and to Christian churches. There is a fresh sense of collaboration and camaraderie among Christian groups, which has often been the case

throughout history when believers have faced pressure, opposition, or persecution. The churches have to unite and mobilize their efforts and energy, in order to face the challenges and reach out to those in need. Unfavorable conditions are gradually drawing Christians together and sharpening their faith, witness, and service. This is the current situation in the Middle East, and this is where hundreds of pastors and missionaries are faithfully trying to serve, respond to ever-changing conditions, provide care, maintain a presence, and, at times, merely survive in an unpredictable climate and under unfriendly circumstances.

Common Misperceptions

There are a number of misunderstandings and misconceptions regarding the Arabic world and the Middle East in general, especially in the Western mind and media. Such ideas often take the form of inaccurate impressions or sociocultural stereotypes which can be very misleading and, at times, dangerous (Abi-Hashem, 1992). They need to be corrected, especially in the minds of Western Christians who are interested in supporting churches and ministries in the Middle East.

All Arabs Are Muslims

Although the majority of Arabs are Muslims, there are significant Christian communities in the region, in some countries more than others. Middle East historians have documented the presence of Christianity in the Arabic peninsula centuries before Islam. Early church missionaries spread east from Jerusalem to the deserts, reaching multitudes of local tribes and Bedouin Arabs, and then continued to the Far East until they reached the tip of India. Many of the Christians in Arabia converted to Islam, either under direct threat of repeated holy Muslim raids or through indirect pressure which made conversion a matter of necessity for survival. Since then, Islam has kept expanding to become one of the major religious

and political systems in the world. It is, today, one of the fastest growing religions in the world. Islamic strategists are mobilizing intense missions and evangelistic efforts to reach both the contemporary/affluent world and the developing/underprivileged countries with the message of the Quraan.

Some Muslims, just like Christians, are such by affiliation and heritage only. They are not necessarily “practicing” or committed Muslims. However, religious affiliation is still an integral part of people’s sense of community and part of their social identity. In the Middle East, there is usually no sharp division between religion and government. Both are intertwined, along with the cultural heritage and social customs. Therefore, people and leaders are not afraid of referring to God or making room for their faiths or respecting each other’s practices and customs in private, in public, in business, or in politics.

Presently, the largest Christian presence in the Arabic world is found in Egypt, although it is still considered a minority when compared to the total population of that country. It is mainly represented by the historic, yet active Coptic church, a North African form of the Eastern Orthodox. Other mainline Christian denominations, parachurch organizations, and other bodies and institutions are present as well. But lately, most of them have been under serious pressure and even persecution. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the residual effects of the Gulf War in 1991 strongly fed into the anti-West, anti-Christianity movement in the Arabic world.

In most Muslim countries, Christian gatherings and activities are restricted. In Jordan, Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, where the system is moderate, churches have limited freedom as the state keeps an eye on them. Depending on the religious system of the particular country, the day of worship for the churches is normally Friday, because Sunday is a regular business day. Preachers and church leaders have to monitor carefully what they say, because a secret

intelligence agent may be present at any church service or activity.

In Saudi Arabia, Libya, Qatar, Yemen, Bahrain, Morocco, and Kuwait, where the state law is mostly Islamic, few or no church buildings are allowed. In some cases, meeting houses or worship halls are permitted to foreigners only. Approaching a local resident in any form of direct evangelization or persuasion is against the law and is severely punished. Punishment may take the form of withdrawing hard-to-obtain permission to meet as a religious group or even deportation of the people involved. In highly restricted countries, national believers meet secretly for Bible study and prayer, while closely monitoring doors, windows, and telephone lines.

The most free and democratic country in the whole region has been Lebanon. Up until the last decade, Lebanon used to be known as the Christian nation in the Middle East, because the vast majority of its population were Christians. It has been the home of many Christian organizations, seminaries, agencies, and publication houses which have been serving the needs of the church communities in the area. The presidency and most of the key posts in the government, army, and judicial system were held by figures from the Christian community. Other countries in the region are largely monarchies, semi-democratic systems, or still ruled by a one-party regime.

Lebanon had a very distinct cultural characteristic that separated it from other countries in the Middle East. Beirut is a strategic gate and cosmopolitan city that is open to both the East and the West. Although it is part of the Arabic world by affiliation, culture, and language, yet it is European and Western in many ways, especially in its urban lifestyle, education, exposure, finance, and international affairs. All the other Christian communities in the whole Arabic world used to look to Lebanon for leadership, encouragement, networking, and moral support that enhanced their minority status in their own community.

While not all Arabs are Muslims, note too that not all Muslims are Arabs. Indonesia (the largest Muslim country), Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, and several African nations are legally and religiously Muslim, but culturally and ethnically they are not Arabic. In addition, large populations in the Far East, the former Soviet Union, and recently in the West are also Muslims.

Not all Middle Easterners are Arabs either. Although Iran is a Middle Eastern country, it is not Arabic but rather Persian. Cyprus is a Middle Eastern island, but half of its population is Greek, and the other half is Turkish. Cyprus is ruled by Turkey, another non-Arab nation. Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Morocco are North African yet are largely Arabic nations and members of the Arabic League of Nations.

All Arabs Are Primitive People

“The first images that come to the Westerner’s mind when he thinks of the Arabs are sand, desert, camels, oil wells, irrational mobs ... and the like” (Hamady, 1960, p. 229). This is a socioeconomic stereotype. “The Western world must realize that ignorance about Arabian culture and history is not ‘bliss,’ but a detriment to international relations” (Hamada, 1990, p. 128). That is also true of Western Christians and missionaries who are interested in investing efforts in this region. Unfortunately, many well-meaning organizations and individuals jump into the field without adequate preparation or careful consultation. The results are usually unfavorable and negative on all levels.

As is the case with other large regions, the Arabic people and nations have a wide variety of societies, subcultures, economic levels, and traditions. On one end of the spectrum, there are the oldest and most traditional lifestyles, found in villages, small towns, and among the nomads. On the other end, there are the contemporary and most complex lifestyles. Since the region is deeply rooted in land and history, many traditions and characteristics of the people are transferred through the

generations and are woven into the fabric of social structure and communal living like threads of gold.

Not all Middle Eastern countries have oil, deserts, or wealth. Some are rich and well-established, while others are struggling and still developing. Lebanon, for example, was a leader in the whole region in terms of finances, education, tourism, and income per capita, although it has no oil, deserts, or camels. For decades it was called the Switzerland of the Middle East. Not anymore! Small nations often pay the price of regional conflicts and become victims of world politics. This has been the experience of Lebanon, where interference of other nations has significantly deteriorated and disintegrated the country. The Lebanese people deeply grieve the loss of their identity, their accomplishments, their uniqueness, and most probably their country. With the winds of change and unpredictable politics in the region, Lebanon may become another Cyprus or perhaps a second Palestine. It may lose its role as a leading “Christian” nation, its social and religious freedom, its historic capacity to train church leaders for the whole Middle East, and its ability to host most of the European and North American mission and parachurch organizations that serve the Near East and North Africa.

All Arabs Are Fanatics and Terrorists

In the minds of some Westerners, the term Arabic is equivalent to fanatic, radical Muslim, uncivilized, or even terrorist. This misconception could be the result, in part, of a biased media, uninformed reports, or misleading news agencies. Some Arabs, living or traveling in the West, refer to themselves as Middle Easterners rather than Arabs, because of the recent stereotypes associated with the term.

The reality is that there are different types of Muslim societies. There are the *traditional* (good and simple-hearted people, mostly rural, who enjoy a peaceful community life and a rich cultural heri-

tage), the *secular* (mostly educated and business people, who live in fairly open and progressively complex societies), the *fundamental* (highly dedicated, zealous, and radically committed to the socio-political and religious causes of Islam to an extreme stand), the *moderate* (balanced in views and practices, as individuals, groups, or countries), and, finally, the *national* (who strive to establish a regime uniting the government, religion, and social life by applying the Islamic civil laws and regulations to all aspects of personal, communal, and societal affairs) (for further analysis, see Voll, 1982).

In the understanding of some “cultural” Muslims, such as Abd Al-Masih (1996), Islam is not just another religion or religious option, as many Westerners define it. “Islam is a theocentric religion” (p. 50). Real Muslims, as some of the minority “fundamentalists” explain, must aim toward a Theocratic State. Such religious states reflect the spiritual, cultural, and civil systems integrated together. According to Abd Al-Masih, there is a striking difference between Islam and Christianity regarding the view of religious wars and the use of force: Allah in the Quraan commands the faithful Muslims to strive, and he promises that those who die in the holy jihad “hope to ascend directly into paradise” (p. 60). Mohammed is believed to have taken part in some raids, and his model “remains the unique ideal for all Islamic wars in the name of Allah” (p. 60).

The rise of “extremists” or “fanatics”—by far the minority—as an extreme form of resistance or, as they consider themselves, freedom fighters and carriers of supreme ideological causes in Allah’s service, has reshaped the whole atmosphere in the Middle East and North Africa. Obviously, there are major reasons that so many groups are angry with the West in general and are hostile toward the United States in particular. Increasingly, they resent the West for its cultural invasion, economic exploitation, political oppression, military superiority, and imperialistic greed. They are specifically angry at the U.S. govern-

ment for its unconditional and excessive support of the state of Israel. For devout Muslims, Jerusalem is an extremely important place. It is their third holiest city, after Mecca (Makkah) and Al-Madina, both in Saudi Arabia. In addition, those who “have little or nothing” can resent the level of materialism, hedonism, and affluent consumption of those who “have a lot and plenty.” Also, some equate Christianity with the West and remember with bad taste the history of European Crusaders who invaded the Arabic region and the Muslim world. Furthermore, they react negatively to the corrupt lifestyles, products, items, and movies that the West constantly exports to the Middle East.

Understanding the major types of Muslim communities and the basic belief system of Islam has tremendous implications for any Christian work or workers in the Middle East. Depending on the kind of society and level of religious dedication where Christian pastors and missionaries decide to locate and serve, they must be careful in their approaches, language, and activities. The ultimate goal is to be accepted and effective in making needed contributions and, at the same time, avoiding any provocative mistakes or unnecessary offenses to the hosting community and the larger Middle Eastern society.

Historical and Religious Background

The terms Arabia and Arabah refer to the plains and wilderness. “The Arabs and Hebrews originally did not comprise either a nation or nationality. They were nomadic tribes wandering in the wilderness” (Hamada, 1990, p. 41). Most Westerners would be surprised to know that Arabs and Jews come from the same origin, “and both of them are called Semites” (p. 40). Also, the term Arab means “desert” and is probably derived from the Hebrew word Eber. “Eber literally refers to the people living ‘over the other side,’ or ‘beyond the river [Euphrates].’ Abir is the Arabic word for Eber, meaning ‘to cross

over” (p. 40). In the Quraan, the word Arab is also used to describe Bedouins and nomads. One of the biblical references to Arabs occurs in Jeremiah 25:24, “all the kings of Arabia and all the kings of the mixed tribes that dwell in the desert.”

Although the word Islam in Arabic has the connotation of peace, fundamentally it means a total submission to the will of Allah. Islam calls for a complete surrender to God, the only One, Transcendent, and the Most High. Allah is remote and invisible, and true and faithful Muslims can only follow his laws and teachings as brought by Mohammed, who is God’s closing Messenger and the Seal of God’s Prophets. Mohammed appeared to be a deep thinker and a great reformer. He diligently learned about spiritual life and piety and boldly confronted paganism and social disorder of his day. His reputation quickly spread, and his message was broadly embraced. The phase of pre-Islamic Arabia, *al-jabileyya*, was referred to as a time of ignorance before Mohammed introduced “the true way.” Although there were monotheist tribes around the area, which Mohammed respected and which attracted him by their faith in one God, he desired to unify Arabia and Islam.

Thus, the rise and expansion of Islam as a strong religious, cultural, and political movement resulted in the birth of a major world civilization that enjoyed significant prosperity and advances in architecture, science, and literature, while most of Europe was still struggling in dark history. That was definitely the golden age of Islam. Many Muslim groups and nations are presently trying to restore that glory. They are still hoping to recover the full power of Islam and are dreaming about its full unity and expansion. Many Muslim nations have great financial resources, mainly from the rich wells of oil, known to them as black gold. As such, they feel especially blessed by Allah and deeply obligated to preserve and spread his only true way (Youssef, 1991).

Essentially, Islam is a way of life guided by a set of beliefs, specific doctrines, spiri-

tual rules, civil laws, and social norms. The vast interpretations of the Islamic teachings fill volumes of detailed commentaries pertaining to almost every aspect of communal life, personal behavior, and family conduct. It is important to keep in mind that Islam is like any other large, historic religion in that it contains several branches and schools of thought, as well as various traditions and cultural distinctives. Devout Muslims of all traditions strongly feel responsible to Allah to obey his laws and carry on his causes. Islam stresses the oneness of God and his unity and sovereignty. There is a great deal of overlap of stories, and there are many parallel themes between Christianity and Islam, between the Bible and the Quraan.

Six Tenets of Islamic Faith

1. *Al-Shabaada*—the profession of faith. “I proclaim that there is no God but Allah (the One God), and Mohammed is the messenger (Rassooll) of Allah.” This tenet is the key to becoming and remaining a true Muslim.

2. *Al-Salaat*—prescribed prayers, five times daily, public or private, facing Makkah (Mecca), their holiest city. A prayer call is usually broadcasted from the minaret of mosques around the Muslim world. Prayers are not conversations with God, but rather tasks and repetitions of set lines, in order to obey God’s demands and please him. At death, only Allah has the last word about who goes to Paradise and who goes to Fire. Moslems hope their conduct, deeds, and spiritual sincerity will weigh heavier than their sins, so that God will rule in their favor. They are free to utter personal prayers after they recite the expected ones.

3. *Al-Zakaat*—giving alms, a requirement of practicing the faith. Giving in any form and to any good cause would qualify as well (such as Islamic missions). Beggars take advantage of such practices, especially around Muslim holidays.

4. *Al-Sa’uom*—fasting, mostly limited to the holy month of Ramadan, when the Quraan is believed to have been given or

directly revealed to Mohammed. The Muslim year is based on 12 lunar months.

5. *Al-Hajj*—pilgrimage to Makkah. It must be made during a certain window of time of the Muslim lunar calendar and must be made at least once in a lifetime. Millions of Muslims from around the world gather in Saudi Arabia in what is known to be the largest single religious pilgrimage in history.

6. *Al-Jihad*—striving for a holy cause or serving Allah with fervent zeal and supreme effort. This term may have both a soft and a strong connotation. It can be applied on the personal level (e.g., an individual quest toward purity and piety), as well as on the communal or national level (e.g., seeking greater dedication to Islam as a country). If necessary, it can take an intense or extreme meaning like “fighting a holy war,” which is believed to be the duty of every dedicated Muslim—man or woman, boy or girl—in the face of corruption, threat, or injustice. Jihad is called for in order to defend, empower, or reform the faith. Although most Muslims are friendly and compassionate people, yet inside the core of Muslim doctrine there is room for extreme views, extreme interpretations, and radical positions, which easily can lead to militant sentiments and the use of aggression or force.

It is no secret that not only organizations and groups support the multiple efforts to spread out the Islamic faith and its practice, but certain official governments send major funding to advance the cause of Islam worldwide. They are supporting a variety of intense efforts to teach the Quraan and win converts in Africa, to empower Muslim communities and struggling nations in the former Soviet Union, and to build large mosques and Islamic centers throughout Europe and North America. Islamic strategists are using methods, devices, and approaches similar to those used by Christians in evangelism and missionary work. According to Wertsman (2001, p. 42), “Despite the disproportionate number of Christian Arabs, the influx of Muslim Arabs has contributed to Islam

becoming one of the fastest-growing religions in the United States. It is believed that in the next few decades, Muslims will outnumber Jews in the United States.”

As the Muslim message is going further West, the Christian message is going further East. However, many Muslim nations closely protect their people and their borders from any Christian influence. They are concerned about any Christian or non-Muslim penetration. They do not allow any freedom of religion besides Islam, which is to them the only religion. Such countries are known to be restrictive and operate under severe laws (reinforcing Islamic law). They tend to oppose and, at times, persecute any non-Muslim beliefs and activity. Christian workers who live in such environments must carefully watch their movements, relationships, and activities. In contrast, Western countries in general offer Muslim (and other) immigrants and strategists freedom to move, worship, teach, recruit others, and practice their faith and customs.

Challenges Facing Christian Ministry

The more active an Evangelical or Protestant ministry is, the more resistance it may face. This resistance may come not only from non-Christian religious leaders, from the state, or from the radical social and political groups, but also from some leaders of the traditional and ancient churches, who question the authenticity of such recent church and parachurch movements. The latter group can perceive Evangelicals and Protestants as not belonging to the Middle East’s long history and heritage. Rather, their ministries are seen as imported forms of Christianity from the West, which lack continuity, substance, and cohesion among Middle Easterners. Other groups which are politically leftist and radical in their ideologies think that Evangelicals and Protestants have hidden political agendas and are pro-West and therefore pro-Zionist in their orientation. This belief greatly complicates ministry.

Local pastors and missionaries must try to explain and demonstrate that they are truly biblical, that they are non-political, that they have nothing to do with the modern state of Israel as a Jewish nation, and that they have a lot in common with the traditional churches and historic Christian faiths in the region.

The more open and friendly pastors and missionaries are to the local spiritual and community leaders (it’s better to befriend the non-Christian religious leaders as well), the more acceptable they and their ministry will be. Unfortunately, some Evangelical pastors and missionaries bring with them an individualistic and more isolated approach, which causes more harm than good. Instead of building toward cooperative efforts and working alongside the nationals and other locals, the isolated strategies normally create negative impressions, bad publicity, and increased suspicion. Most importantly, those who follow such strategies alienate themselves and those around them in the community.

I often tell my colleagues in the Middle East that we cannot afford to criticize, oppose, or fight each other because of doctrinal or practical differences. We need to unify our efforts and support each other, allowing room for unique styles and approaches within the larger Christian community. Thankfully, we see this happening more and more through the formation of “strategic partnerships” of Christians within the region, both nationals and expatriates. These groups bring together different organizations and denominations in order to pray and develop cooperative strategies for ministry together. They are a breath of fresh air and an essential encouragement in the midst of pressure and turmoil.

Pastors and missionaries often face significant emotional struggles and psychological distress in their personal, marital, and family life. In addition, they often serve a troubled population and families all around the area who need careful help and, at times, professional attention. To be effective, Christian workers need sound

training and continuing education, as well as skills in problem solving, crisis intervention, and basic counseling. They also have needs for belonging and for true camaraderie, needs for personal and intellectual growth, and a need for someone to check on them, stand by them, and encourage them. They long to be nurtured, mentored, and well supported.

During the last five years, I have been spending several months in the Middle East every year, making myself available to the churches and the community at large. I have tried to help in any way possible—teaching, counseling, preaching, training, and encouraging. I have greatly enjoyed meeting with Christian workers and listening to their remarkable journeys.

Besides the chronic uncertainties and major stresses of everyday life, many Christian workers from the Middle East—just like their compatriots in other parts of the world—carry with them heavy burdens, along with profound sadness and grief. Many have been through numerous crises, have experienced major losses, and have been exposed to traumatic events. And the agonies continue. In addition, there can be severe economic hardships, which put an additional burden on pastors and nationals. Just living on the bare minimum is a challenge. Many people have to work at two jobs in order to survive. Some have been refugees and immigrants, even within their own countries. Their lives have been uprooted, family relations have been forcefully disrupted, and their loved ones have been scattered. Their hopes for even a minimum level of stability have been broken and lost. Yet, they try to keep the faith diligently and serve the Lord earnestly. They are truly heroes of the faith.

Reflections on Religious Persecution

In the second half of this article, I (Anneke) would like to share a brief chapter from my book on women in the persecuted church, *Hidden Sorrow, Lasting Joy*

(Companjen, 2000). The specific focus is on some cases of persecution against Christians in Iran. These cases are a vivid example of the high price that believers and church leaders often pay. Takoosh, the main subject, gave her consent to use her name and to share her story.

Please understand that I am in no way trying to single out Iran, since persecution and discrimination are taking place in many shapes and forms in several countries—and not just in the Middle East alone—and they are affecting a number of other faiths and world religions. Nonetheless, Christians are by far the largest group who suffer as a result of their faith. In fact, over 200 million Christians lack their full human rights as described in Article 18 of the United Nations' 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, primarily because of their religious convictions (Candelin, 2001).

Article 18 states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion of belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance." In 1981, the United Nations General Assembly reaffirmed the principles enunciated in this Declaration and other earlier documents via its *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief*.

Takoosh Hovsepian: In God's University

Takoosh was a lively Iranian teenager from an Armenian background with flashing dark eyes and a beautiful smile. She sometimes attended church with her grandmother, and there she heard that she could have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. For some reason, she just couldn't get the idea out of her mind, and after several conversations she prayed with some of her friends and invited the Lord into her life.

Soon after she came to Jesus, Takoosh brought a very important request to God in prayer. “Lord, please give me a husband who loves you. I want so much to serve you, and I pray for a partner who is a Christian so that we can serve you together.”

Of course she had no way of knowing that a young man named Haik Hovsepien was bringing a very similar request before God. Haik was a believer, too. He had just finished his studies and felt he was being called by God into Christian ministry.

“Lord,” he prayed, “I want you to use me in your service. But I need someone to stand with me, someone to share my ministry with me. Please help me find a godly girl who wants to please you above all else. Lead me to her, Lord, and I’ll ask her to be my wife.”

Haik often served as a guest speaker in various churches. One Sunday morning he visited the city of Isfahan. While he was preaching there, his eyes fell on a fifteen-year-old girl sitting in the audience. There were quite a few other young women sitting in the congregation, but for some reason his eyes were drawn to that one special face. He had fasted and prayed that he would find a godly wife before making the journey. Was it his imagination, or was the Lord saying, *This is the woman you have prayed for. I have chosen her for you!*

Could it be so? Or was he simply responding to a pair of dark eyes, a quiet spirit, a lovely smile? He couldn’t be sure. She seemed a little too tall and slim, but something in his spirit kept saying, *This is the one.* Well aware that he was about to make one of the most important decisions of his life, Haik fasted and prayed for three days. And by the end of his fasting, he still felt that the Lord was speaking to him in the same way.

Fighting off his doubts and fears, the young man summoned all his courage and went to talk to Takoosh. He told her about his prayer for a godly wife. “This is a little hard to explain,” he began rather sheepishly, “but I think God has shown me that you’re the woman he has chosen for me.”

Takoosh was stunned. She wasn’t sure what to say, but deep in her heart she had much the same feeling. In an unsteady voice, she answered, “Like you, I’ve been praying for a mate who wants to serve the Lord with me. Maybe you’re the answer to my prayer, too.”

Later that evening, when she tried to talk things over with her parents, they weren’t at all pleased. “You don’t even know this man!” they protested. “And you need to finish your education. What if you’re left alone some day and you have to work? You’ll have nothing to fall back on!”

But the more she talked to Haik and the more she talked to God, the more Takoosh was convinced that this man really was the one for her. After much conversation with her parents and after many private prayers, Takoosh’s family eventually relented. They were, in fact, impressed with the young man, too.

“He is an exceptional boy,” her father said. “I can see that for myself.”

Great Joy, Deep Sorrow

So at quite a young age, Takoosh became Mrs. Hovsepien. She soon found out that being married to a pastor in Iran was not exactly an easy life. But Haik’s love and his gentle, romantic ways helped her through the early adjustments. He clearly loved her, and they both deeply loved the Lord.

Those were days of increasing political upheaval in Iran, which eventually culminated in the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Before long, Takoosh’s parents fled the country and moved to the United States.

“Are you wishing you could move to the States, too?” Haik asked her the day she told her parents good-bye.

“No,” Takoosh told him. “There’s no way I’m leaving you. I am staying here. But just remember—I’m doing it for you!”

“I’d rather you stayed for God,” Haik countered.

But from that time on, perhaps because he was the only family she now had in the country, Haik began to treat his wife like a

queen. He realized it was painful for Takoosh to live such a huge distance away from her loved ones. So he did everything he could to encourage her and keep her spirits up.

The two of them were genuinely well matched and content with one another, and their happiness was inexpressible when their first child, a little boy, was born. Like most new fathers, Haik was enormously proud of the baby. And the more Haik fell in love with their son, the more Takoosh fell in love with Haik. Those were the most joyful days of her life—caring for her infant son and watching his father’s delight in him.

“God, you are so good to us,” Takoosh sometimes prayed, feeling deep gratitude for her new family. “You’ve given me a wonderful husband who loves you and a beautiful baby. I’m so thankful that we’re serving you together.”

By then, Haik was pastoring a Christian fellowship, which was growing larger every week. Not only was he an excellent Bible teacher, but Haik was also a gifted musician who loved to lead the congregation in praise. He had an exceptionally good voice, and the worship in their church never failed to move her to tears. “Thank you, Lord, for all you’ve done for us,” Takoosh often prayed, feeling blessed in ways she never could have imagined.

Unfortunately, the greatest joys in life sometimes have to make room for the deepest sorrows. And so it would be for Takoosh, who would soon have to face more than her share of suffering. One night as they drove to a Christian meeting, Haik’s car was struck head-on by another vehicle. The other driver was clearly at fault, but it was little comfort to anyone. Haik and Takoosh were severely injured. Their beautiful son was killed instantly.

Takoosh’s physical pain was severe, but her emotional agony was indescribable.

“How could you allow this to happen to us, Lord?” Takoosh often cried out as her body slowly and painfully mended. “All we ever wanted to do was to serve you.

Why didn’t you protect us? Why did our baby have to die?”

There were no easy answers for Takoosh’s desperate questions, and for many months it seemed that her broken spirit would never heal. It took her a very long time to stop being angry at God. Thankfully, the other Christians in their church understood her battle, and they interceded for her continually. They prayed that Takoosh would be able to forgive the other driver. They prayed that the Lord would heal her aching heart. And they helped in every practical way imaginable.

Eventually, Takoosh relinquished her bitterness into God’s hands, and once she did so, the wound in her heart gradually diminished. As time went by, she learned how to keep her sorrow in its place, especially after the Lord gave her and Haik another son.

Meanwhile, Haik was a tower of strength during this terrible time. His strong faith in God made it possible for him not to waver in days of adversity. Rather than dwelling on his own loss, he went out of his way to help Takoosh. She was amazed to see that her husband would do anything to make her life easier. Her love for him knew no bounds. He was the light of her life.

“Brother Haik Is Missing”

Over the years, as their family increased, so did their persecutions. After the death of their first son, Haik and Takoosh were blessed with four more children—three sons and a daughter. And when Mehdi Dibaj, another Iranian pastor, was taken to prison and his wife was unable to care for their children, the family increased yet again. Haik became like a father to the Dibaj children as well.

By now Haik’s role in the Iranian Christian community had become both more important and more visible. He was now chairman of the Council of Protestant Pastors. It was up to him in this position to issue a report about the violations of Christians’ rights in Iran, a report that was published all over the world. He also refused

to endorse a document produced by Iran's religious and political authorities stating that the Christian church in Iran enjoyed freedom of religion. This made him no friends in the hardcore fundamentalist regime that now ruled the country.

To make matters worse, when Haik was pressured to stop reaching out to Muslims with the gospel message, he flatly refused. He made it clear that his Tehran church would continue to welcome anyone and everyone who wanted to know more about Jesus the Messiah.

Brother Haik preached the gospel everywhere he went, to whoever would listen, no matter what their beliefs. No government could restrain him. His church was alive and active, and Haik was loved by everyone who knew him—everyone except the Iranian authorities. Living an outspoken Christian life in a militantly Muslim world was a challenge few believers would dare to face, but Haik faced it daily, along with other Christian leaders who shared his courage and faith. Haik set an example for the entire world to see by refusing to give in to intimidation and fear.

One day in January 1994, Haik kissed Takoosh good-bye and headed for the airport, where he was scheduled to meet with a friend. At first, when he didn't return, she thought the authorities might have detained him. But when she called around, every official said the same thing: "We don't know anything about him." Takoosh's best hope was that her husband was in jail.

A couple of days later, Johan, the children, and I were starting to eat dinner when the telephone interrupted our meal-time conversation. Johan took the call, and as he listened to the voice on the other end of the phone, the expression on his face told us all that something was terribly wrong.

The call was from California, from an Iranian Christian friend there. "Johan, Brother Haik has been missing for two days. Nobody knows where he is or what's happened to him. He went to the airport

to meet somebody and never returned home. Please pray, and try to mobilize others to pray as well. Frankly, it doesn't look good...."

The sad news came as a shock, but it was not totally unexpected. We knew Pastor Haik had been extremely outspoken about the persecution of Iranian Christians. During the previous months, there had been a worldwide campaign to protest and pray against the imminent execution of Mehdi Dibaj, whose children Haik and Takoosh had been caring for the nine years he had been in jail. Dibaj had been unexpectedly released only a few days before.

Through Open Doors, we contacted friends and colleagues who organized a massive prayer effort. Within hours, thousands of people in dozens of countries were praying for Haik around the clock.

Finally, after more than a week of anxiously waiting for news about his whereabouts, on Sunday morning, January 30, the phone rang at the Hovsepien house. Takoosh handed the receiver to their oldest son, Joseph. "It's the police," she said quietly. "They want to talk to you."

When Joseph arrived at the police station, an officer unceremoniously thrust a grisly photograph into his hands. "Is this your father?" the policeman asked coldly. "We found this body in a small alleyway in Tehran. He was brutally murdered. Looks like he died about 10 days ago."

Joseph identified the body in the photograph as his father's.

Waves of shock rippled across the world. In fact, many Christians—even those who didn't know Haik personally—felt that they had lost a close friend. But Takoosh and her four children, ages ten to twenty-three, had lost the dearest person in all the world to them.

Takoosh wept for days. The skin beneath her eyes became inflamed and infected. She simply could not stop crying. Days later, our own eyes filled with tears as we watched a video of the memorial service in the Assembly of God church in Tehran. I could not take my eyes off Haik's

widow. She was seated in the front row, surrounded by her children, all dressed in black. Her face was a study in tragedy. I wondered if she would ever smile again.

The church was filled to overflowing. A large picture of Haik was placed on the platform surrounded by dozens of floral wreaths and bouquets. We listened in silence to a recording of one of Haik's sermons on persecution and suffering. Later on, his beautiful voice filled the auditorium as one of his recorded songs was played.

The camera zoomed in on Mehdi Dibaj. "Not Haik, but I should have died!" he exclaimed when he spoke during the service. It wasn't long before his words proved prophetic.

Lessons to Be Learned

Christians everywhere prayed for Takoosh and her family, and for the believers in Iran who were going through such a difficult time. Thousands of letters and cards were sent. Their greetings were appreciated, but the wound in Takoosh's spirit seemed beyond repair. As the reality of Haik's murder sank in, she found herself in a mighty spiritual struggle.

Takoosh's heart was filled with hatred toward the murderers of her husband. She hated the Muslims who had brought this tremendous grief upon her and her family. Thoughts of vindication festered in her mind. She was afraid of her own rage, afraid that she would lose control and strike someone with her car or cause injury to an innocent person.

When friends visited Takoosh some months later, she shook her head and said, "I've been in God's University. I started out in the lowest grade, but slowly and steadily he began to work in my heart. First, I simply had to be *willing* to forgive the murderers. Forgiveness started with a decision of the will, and the emotions followed much later. One day, after giving God permission to take it away, I realized that the hatred was gone. At last I could forgive the people who killed my husband."

Takoosh had won a battle, but it was not long before she became aware of another hurdle. God was asking her to not only forgive her enemies but to *love* them.

"Lord, you're asking too much," she cried out to him. "How can I love them when they killed the love of my life?"

God gently took her by the hand and helped her. Little by little, step by step, she came to the point where she realized that she *could* love her enemies. She began to see the Muslim extremists the way God saw them—as lost sheep without a Shepherd. God asked Takoosh to love, and he enabled her to love. He helped her to pass the second test.

"But I still wasn't quite ready to graduate from God's University," she said. "The process was not over. God told me that he wanted me to praise and thank him for what had happened."

It was impossible. Forgiveness and love she could deal with dutifully, but praise required her to sing, to rejoice, to celebrate. How could anyone expect her to do that? God knew how much Haik had meant to her, how she needed him and depended on him.

"Still, I wanted to be obedient and grow in the Lord," Takoosh explained. "So again I had no other choice. With my mouth I started to thank the Lord, even though my heart was crying at the same time. My heart was not ready, but I obeyed with my mouth. And God, as before, started to work in my soul."

The Christian men and women in the Tehran church went out of their way to help the Hovsepian family. During the days Haik was missing, and after the news of his death was confirmed, church members and many local pastors took turns in comforting Takoosh and the children.

For a long time they took care of her everyday needs in the most practical ways. They shopped, they cooked, they cleaned, they served guests. There was not a day that Takoosh was left alone. Someone was always there to comfort her, to encourage her from the Scriptures, and to provide for her.

“Though I missed my family a lot, there was not a moment after Haik’s death that I wished that they were with me,” Takoosh shared. “I received all the love, care, and comfort I needed from the church.”

The Lord himself was real to Takoosh in personal, sometimes amazingly tangible ways. God demonstrated to her that he was not only interested in providing for her big needs but was also concerned about the smallest details of her life. One of the little comforts Takoosh enjoyed was eating chocolate. One day, to her regret, she realized that she had only a little piece left. As she ate it she prayed, “Please, Lord, you know how I love chocolate. Would you send me some more?”

That same day some visitors from Canada and the United States arrived in her apartment. She gratefully unwrapped their gifts—toys and clothes for the other martyrs’ families. And, then, at the very last, she joyfully opened something that had been brought especially for her—chocolate. Once again, Takoosh was reminded of her heavenly Father’s unfailing care.

One of Takoosh’s most difficult times was when Rebecca, their daughter, got married. Takoosh needed supernatural grace to somehow make it a joyful day for the young couple. Haik and Takoosh had been looking forward to this happy occasion together. Now she had to go through it alone. While the house was being decorated for the wedding, Takoosh quietly cried out to the Lord to help her through it.

It was a day of immense joy, because the two young Christians were starting out their lives together with God’s blessing. Takoosh was thankful that her daughter had been given a godly husband, but for her, the day felt empty and bleak without Haik there to celebrate with them.

A Matter of Life and Death

Takoosh wasn’t the only grieving Christian widow in Iran. In December 1990, Pastor Soodmand, a convert from Islam, was hanged near the city of Mashad. His

wife, who was blind, had a very hard time coping with his death, but Takoosh was able to share with her what she was going through. Although Mrs. Soodmand was comforted to know that others, like Takoosh, have experienced grief much like her own, she continues to need our prayers.

As it turned out, Haik was not the only Christian pastor to lay down his life in Iran that year. In June, after six months of freedom, Mehdi Dibaj was murdered in a park, leaving his four children behind. He died as a martyr, too, even though the government blamed a terrorist group, the Moedjaheddin Khalq, for his sudden death.

Dibaj’s body was released only two hours before his funeral, and even then the family was not allowed to open the coffin. This heroic servant of God had been willing to lay down his life from the start. His wife had left him during the years of his detention, and his four children suffered doubly—first they had lost their “adoptive” father, Haik, and now their own father was gone. But like the Hovsepian children, they followed in their father’s footsteps and continued to serve the Lord.

Only a few days after Mehdi Dibaj’s death, Pastor Tateos Michaelian was shot and killed, leaving his wife, Juliet, and three grown children. Another leader was gone. Pastor Michaelian had succeeded Haik as chairman of the Council of Protestant Pastors in Iran. Only five months after he took on this responsibility, he paid for it with his life. His wife now lives in California with one of her married daughters.

On September 28, 1996, the worldwide Christian community was shaken again. The body of Pastor Ravanbakhsh Yousefi was found hanging from a tree some twenty miles from his house in Ghaem-Shahr. He had left his home early that day to spend time in prayer and meditation. Still another Christian minister had laid down his life in Iran. And another widow, Akhtar, now faced life alone with her two small children.

The sudden death of her husband devastated Akhtar. Today, like Takoosh, she is walking the long road of sorrow, working through her pain step by step. Every day at three o'clock, Takoosh calls Akhtar. More than anyone else, she understands what Akhtar is going through.

Christians around the world often pray for their brothers and sisters in Iran, and well we should. These faithful believers are confronted with one of the most virulent persecutions on earth. But a pastor from that country, who visited the States recently, told us, "You pray for us, but maybe you need our prayers more. We cannot afford to wander away from Jesus. We need him so much for every small detail of our lives that we *have* to stay close to him. It's a matter of life and death for us."

That matter of life and death—faith in the Lord Jesus Christ—has been tried and tested in the hearts of Takoosh and her children. They continue to value our prayers for healing, wisdom, and guidance. They live in California now, but dealing with the past and moving courageously into the future continue to challenge them.

But one thing will never change. What Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi, he would surely say to the Hovsepian family and all the other wives and children who have lost their loved ones in Iran: "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6).

Reflection and Discussion

1. What are some of the main social and religious realities that affect Christian workers in the Middle East?
2. How might stressors be different for national pastors and expatriate workers?
3. What are some of the main stereotypes about the Middle East? How could these be changed?
4. Which aspects of the accounts in the case studies touched you the most and why?

5. List a few practical things that could be done to help Christians being persecuted for their faith in the Middle East.

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