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Turmoil in the Middle East

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The Ascendancy of the Islamic State Ewelina Ochab 07 Feb 2019 Lausanne Global Analysis MENA ,
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The eruption of revolts across the Middle East during the last two years reflects the region's dire socio-political situation, especially for the young and educated. It has unleashed a process of change that will take generations to play out.

The main beneficiary of this change was the Muslim Brotherhood. It held

power in Egypt from July 2012 to July 2013. However, it quickly became clear that it lacked the capacity to govern. Over 15 million Egyptians took to the streets, and the military took control of the country. Islamist rule collapsed in just one year.

The Islamist agenda has been exposed for what it is. Many moderate Muslims are questioning the validity of political Islam and calling for a secularised state system. During the last year, the number of secularists and even atheists has increased significantly in Egypt and in other countries in the region. Events in Egypt since June have created new positive relationships between Christians and Muslims, many of whom stood side by side against extremist Islamist policies, although in other parts of Egypt Christians and Christian property have face unprecedented levels of attack.

In the last twenty years there has been a significant surge in the number of Muslims coming to Christ. For centuries, it seemed that Muslim evangelism was impossible. However, the estimated 5 million Christians from a Muslim background today can be found in almost every country in the region. They face severe persecution for their faith. However, their perseverance and faithfulness are a remarkable witness to the gospel.

Middle Eastern Christianity has a long history of worship, fasting and prayer. Today, in the midst of turmoil and persecution, there is a renewed desire. Many Christians believe that it was the power of prayer that has exposed the source of corruption and injustice in the region.

Middle Eastern Christians may well face further times of persecution. However, the church will be stronger and bolder in its witness. The prayer movement will spread to other Middle Eastern countries and will influence all denominations. There are new signs of Christian unity.

The global church needs to enable Christians around the world to be active in praying for and standing along their brothers and sisters, who for centuries have kept the lamp of faith burning amid so much turmoil and persecution.

Churches outside the Middle East should consider active participation with Middle Eastern Churches, including joint ministry programmes, and joining in prayer and worship together. The global church will be richer through connecting with the long spirituality of the Middle Eastern church.

Above all, we need to trust in God's wisdom in reshaping the whole region and using the church for the furthering of his kingdom in the midst of the current chaos. The Lord who holds all power and authority in heaven and on earth has promised to be with his church to the ends of the ages.

The eruption of revolts across the Middle East during the last two years reflects the region's dire socio-political situation: years of regime corruption, police brutality, human rights abuses, economic injustices, poverty and high rates of unemployment, especially among the young and educated. It has unleashed a process of change that will take generations to play out, but it seems unlikely for now that the new regimes will improve economic and social conditions, or deliver democratic participation and a better future for the young generation that fought for freedom.

Islamists thwarted

The main beneficiary of this change was the Muslim Brotherhood, the most influential and organized Islamic political movement in modern history. It started in Egypt in 1928 and has inspired other Sunni Muslim organizations across the Middle East and beyond. In the face of previous corrupt and unjust regimes, such groups presented themselves as saviours under their slogan 'Islam is the Solution'.

It held power in Egypt from July 2012 to July 2013. One of its offshoots is the major player in the governing coalition in Tunisia, and its influence is growing in Syria and elsewhere. However, once the Islamists assumed power in Egypt, it became clear that they lacked the capacity to govern:

- Their exclusionary policies drove investors away and created social chaos.
- Instead of building an inclusive government, they targeted wealthy Christians,

confiscating their businesses and properties.

- Security deteriorated and economic growth stagnated while Islamists were fighting over secondary issues such as proper Islamic dress codes and the policing of morality.

By the end of June 2013, over 15 million (and possibly as many as 30 million) Egyptians took to the streets demonstrating against the Brotherhood, and the military took control of the country, establishing a secular government. It is striking that Islamist rule collapsed in just one year. This has been felt everywhere in the region:

- The Tunisian coalition is in crisis over its future.
- The 'soft' Islamist Turkish government is facing increased opposition from secularists.
- Islamists in Libya are losing political ground.

The constant instability in the region is affecting tourism, forcing businesses to close and companies to move out, scaring investors away and encouraging emigration.

Fundamental regional changes

Current upheavals could transform the territorial arrangements and nation states that were established a century ago after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. For example, the borders of Iraq could be shifting towards the creation of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq, while Syria is being dismembered by the civil war and may well not survive in its current form.

There is a greater emphasis on sectarian, ethnic and tribal identities over national identity. Many Sunnis, Shia, Alawis, Kurds and others are now more focused on sect or ethnic group rather than national state. Sunni-Shia conflict is increasing in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Bahrain. If this continues, it will result in weak or no effective state control.

However, such a trend can be reversed, as with the sudden collapse of the Brotherhood government. This has shown that the Islamist system of

governing, which does not allow for multiculturalism, participation and democracy, cannot survive in a world of advanced social media and increased secularisation.

Moreover, the Islamist agenda and political programme has been exposed for what it is. Many moderate Muslims are questioning the validity of political Islam and calling for a secularised state system. During the last year, the number of secularists and even atheists has increased significantly in Egypt and in other countries in the region.

Events in Egypt since June have created new positive relationships between Christians and Muslims, many of whom stood side by side against extremist Islamist policies, although in other parts of Egypt Christians and Christian property have face unprecedented levels of attack.

Christian decline

Today, there are more than 25 million Christians in the region (including an estimated 5 million from Islamic background), representing 6% of the population:

- From the third century to the fourteenth century, Christians were the majority population in the region.
- Christians lived under Islamic rule for over thirteen centuries.
- However, due to persecution, Christians ceased to be the majority in their homeland by the fourteenth century.

The decline accelerated during the twentieth century due to mass killing, as in the case of Armenians and Assyrians, and emigration:

- By the beginning of the twentieth century, Palestinian Christians numbered over 40% of the population; today they are less than 5% in Israel and the West Bank.
- In Jordan, the percentage has fallen from over 30% to less than 3%; in Lebanon from 70% to less than 30%; and in Iraq from 30% to 2% last year.
- Over 3 million Egyptian Christians have emigrated since the 1960s and thousands of Christians are fleeing Syria.

Muslim background believers

However, in the last twenty years there has been a significant surge in the number of Muslims coming to Christ. For centuries, it seemed that Muslim evangelism was impossible. However, the more Islam and Islamism influence and control the region, the more people are searching for a way out of its grip over their lives:

- Social media are playing a significant role in reaching Muslims with the message of the gospel.
- Satellite TV and the Internet are reaching millions of Muslims.

The estimated 5 million Christians from a Muslim background today can be found in almost every country in the region, even in the most closed and hostile countries to the gospel:

- The number of Christians in Iran today is estimated to be ten times higher than in 1979 when the Islamic revolution started.
- There are indigenous Christians in almost every Gulf state today.
- While the church in North Africa was utterly destroyed by the sixteenth century, God is reaching out to many North Africans through dreams and visions and raising leaders who are building a network of churches and ministries.

Christians from a Muslim background face severe persecution for their faith. They are often branded 'apostates', and as a result risk death, detention, imprisonment, torture, loss of property or annulment of marriage. However, their perseverance and faithfulness are a remarkable witness to the gospel.

Christian influence

Twenty years ago, late king Hussein of Jordan stated correctly that "Middle Eastern Christians are the glue that keeps this region together". Christians were instrumental in influencing and shaping the social life of the region for centuries. Many respected educational institutions were started by Christians:

- Christian Evangelicals initiated women's education in the region in the 1920s.
- The influence of Christian universities led to Lebanon, Egypt and Syria contributing

to the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

- Christians were active participants in the drafting of new constitutions in their countries in the twentieth century based on democracy and equality.
- They were catalysts of secularised political systems that were supposed to respect freedom of speech and religious beliefs of all citizens.

Their active participation today in social services, education and politics, even on a limited scale, provides inspiration and hope for many moderate and educated Arabs who envision a modern state not governed by religious laws:

- Christians across the region are actively involved in establishing high quality educational institutions, which inspire generations of Arabs to call for more democratic systems.
- Christian social organisations are ministering to the wider community in their countries. Examples include the Lebanese Society for Education and Social Development (LSESD) serving thousands of people through education and social services (currently also serving the needs of Syrian refugees), and the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS), which is reaching two million Egyptians through education, small business and health care programmes, empowering them to escape the poverty cycle.

Prayer and sacrifice

Middle Eastern Christianity has a long history of worship, fasting and prayer. Today, in the midst of turmoil and persecution, there is a renewed desire. Many Christians believe that it was the power of prayer that has exposed the source of corruption, injustices and confusion that have dominated over the region for many centuries.

For years before the Egyptian revolution, Kasr El-Dobara (KED) Evangelical Church in central Cairo dedicated days of prayers and fasting for the country. One of the most remarkable prayer meetings took place on November 11, 2011:

- Over 50,000 gathered overnight at the Cave church in Cairo.
- That night of prayer, fasting and repentance was unprecedented in the recent history of Middle Eastern church.

- The prayer was led by church leaders from all denominations and attended by Christians and non-Christians who were drawn to praise and worship with Christians.
- God's glory was manifested and the prayer movement spread to many churches and communities in Egypt and beyond.

In August, more than 120 churches, monasteries and Christian institutions were attacked and burned in Egypt. Thousands of Christians have lost their homes and businesses. The reaction of Egyptian Christians and the church leadership was remarkable. There was no revenge, and Pope Tawadros II, the head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, said "we offer these institutions burned and destroyed by Islamic extremists as a redemptive sacrifice for the country".

These events created a new atmosphere of hospitable relations between Egyptian Christians and Muslims. Many Muslims were puzzled by the Christians' reaction and started asking about the Christian faith. There were even reports of Muslims losing their lives defending church buildings against Muslim extremist attacks.

Outlook

The revolts of the last two years are exposing the real issues facing the region: corruption, oppression and injustice. They are also exposing the socio-political structure of the dominant religion in the region. The swift demise of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt will have significant ramifications for political Islam worldwide. Governments influenced by the movement in Tunisia and Turkey are facing greater challenges, while the suppression of the Brotherhood in Egypt will drive it underground and could lead to renewed extremist violence in Egypt and beyond.

While it seems that the Middle East is moving towards sectarianism and religiously-oriented governance and away from the former semi-secular systems, the current realities of globalisation and global connectedness will

curb governments' attempts to exercise excessive power. Social media will play an instrumental role in shaping the socio-political structure of the region and exposing injustices and corruption

Religious strife among Sunnis and Shia, and moderates and Salafists will intensify and may weaken their overall influence. Again social media will play a key role in exposing the social and political agendas and ethos of such groups.

Implications for Christians

Middle Eastern Christians may well face further times of persecution due to the current unrest and poor security. However, the church in the region will be stronger and bolder in its witness, as in Egypt since August. The prayer movement will spread to other Middle Eastern countries and will influence all Christian denominations: Orthodox, Catholics and Evangelicals. There are new signs of Christian unity, for example the newly formed Egyptian Christian Unity Council.

The global church needs to be aware of the complex realities of the Middle East. It needs to voice its concerns about what is happening in order for Christians around the globe to be active in praying for and standing along their brothers and sisters, who for centuries have kept the lamp of faith burning amid so much turmoil and persecution.

Churches outside the Middle East should consider active participation with Middle Eastern Churches, including joint ministry programmes, and joining in prayer and worship together. The global church will be richer through connecting with the long spirituality of the Middle Eastern church.

Above all, we need to trust in God's wisdom in reshaping the whole region and using the church for the furthering of his kingdom in the midst of the current chaos. The Lord who holds all power and authority in heaven and on earth has promised to be with his church to the ends of the ages.

Endnotes

¹ See David Taylor's [Where Next for the Arab Spring?](#) in the November 2012 issue of *Lausanne Global Analysis*.