

STATE OF THE EPICENTER 2017: HOW MANY FOLLOWERS OF JESUS ARE THERE?

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“I will build My Church, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.”
– The Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 16:18, ESV)

The headlines emanating from the Middle East in recent years have been filled with devastating news – wars, revolutions, terrorism, even genocide.

Many in the Epicenter are being shaken as perhaps never before in human history. Syria is imploding. Iraq is convulsing. Lebanon and Jordan have been overrun by millions of refugees. Egypt has undergone multiple revolutions. Israelis and Palestinians, meanwhile, have faced repeated waves of violence.

The Church has also been deeply shaken. Many followers of Jesus Christ throughout the region have been horribly persecuted and targeted by terrorists. Church buildings have been bombed, set ablaze, and riddled with machine gun fire. Christians have been captured, enslaved, tortured, and beheaded.¹ Some have even been crucified.²

Yet even amidst such darkness, we can rejoice and give thanks because the Holy Spirit is on the move to advance Christ’s unshakeable kingdom. “Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe.” (Hebrews 12:28)

Consider these encouraging facts:

- News of such wars, persecution and suffering has unleashed a great movement of prayer by believers around the world for the Church and the lost in the Epicenter.
- Followers of Jesus in the Middle East are boldly and creatively communicating the Gospel to their people using satellite television, radio broadcasts, the Internet, Bible distribution, literature distribution, and their own personal witness – indeed, they are reaching more people in the region than ever before.
- Millions of Jews and Muslims are now able to hear, read and consider the Gospel message in their own heart languages – just as remarkable, many are open to considering the claims of Jesus for the first time in their lives.
- As a result of so much prayer and faithful seed planting, pastors and ministry leaders throughout the Epicenter report signs of hope – after centuries of spiritual drought, the Church in the Middle East is bearing fruit again. Jews and Muslims are coming to faith, and are being baptized and discipled. There is much to do, but real progress is being made.

In some ways, the current environment is evocative of the First Century. Amidst tremendous hardship and persecution, believers are reaping a harvest by God’s grace.

- “The news about Him [Jesus] spread throughout all Syria, and....large crowds followed Him from Galilee and the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan.” (Matthew 4:24-25)
- “When the Gentiles heard [the Gospel], they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region.” (Acts 13:48-49)
- “After we arrived in Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. After he had greeted them, he began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it they began glorifying God; and they said to him, ‘You see, brother, how many ten thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed....’ (Acts 21:17-20)

To be sure, one must be careful with numbers. Some Western ministry leaders and local pastors can, at times, be tempted to exaggerate progress to friends and donors. Likewise, Radical Islamists and Jewish anti-missionaries can report to their compatriots and donors inflated numbers of Jews and Muslims coming to faith in the Lord Jesus in an attempt to exaggerate a perceived “threat” to their communities.

That said, interviews with a wide range of Arab and Messianic pastors and ministry leaders in the region, and a review of relevant articles, books and studies, provide a useful, if imprecise, snapshot of the state of the Church in the Epicenter.

ISRAEL

- 25,000 to 30,000 born again believers attend Messianic congregations in Israel.³
- 4,000 to 5,000 Arab Evangelical Christians openly worship Jesus in Israel.⁴

PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY

- 1,000 to 1,500 Palestinian Evangelicals live in the Palestinian Authority.⁵
- There are some 200 to 250 Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) who live in the West Bank and Gaza. However, few of them attend church.⁶
- More than 10,000 Palestinian Evangelical Christians live outside of the Palestinian Authority. Some leaders say the number is as high as 30,000, though it is difficult to be precise.⁷

JORDAN

- Between 10,000 and 15,000 Evangelical Christians live in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.⁸
- In addition, an estimated 10,000 Jordanian Evangelical Christians reside outside of the Kingdom, having moved to the U.S., Europe and the Gulf.⁹
- While more than 96% of Jordanians are Muslim, a total of some 145,000 Jordanians are self-described Christians. Most of these are Catholic, but they also include Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, and other historic denominations.¹⁰

EGYPT

- While more than 86% of Egyptians are Muslim, a total of some 11 million Egyptians are self-described Christians. Most of these are Coptic Orthodox, but they also include Catholics, Protestants and other historic denominations.¹¹
- Specifically, some 2,000,000 Protestant Christians live in Egypt.¹²

SYRIA

- Some 21,000 to 23,000 Syrians are Evangelical Christians, though it is impossible to know the precise number as many have had to flee the country.¹³
- While some 90% of Syrians are Muslim, there has always been a sizable Christian minority. As a result of the civil war and the genocide waged by militants loyal to Islamic State, however, many Christians have left the country. Thus, the total number of historic Christians (Syrian Orthodox, Catholic, etc.) living in Syria has dropped from 1.25 million just a few years ago to about 500,000 today.¹⁴

IRAQ

- Between 1,000 and 3,000 Evangelical Christians live in Iraq today.¹⁵
- Altogether, there are an estimated 53,000 Iraqi Evangelical Christians, however due to war, persecution and economic hardships most now live outside of Iraq, many of them in the U.S. and Europe.¹⁶
- While some 96% of Iraqis are Muslim, there has always been a sizable Christian minority. As a result of wars, insurgencies and the genocide waged by militants loyal to Islamic State, however, many Christians have left the country. Indeed, the total number of historic Christians (Catholic, Chaldean Orthodox, etc.) living in Iraq has dropped from about 1.5 million just a few years ago to between 200,000 and 300,000 in 2017.¹⁷

LEBANON

- Between 15,000 and 21,000 Evangelical Christians live in Lebanon.¹⁸
- While about 60% of Lebanese citizens are Muslims, approximately 1.3 million Lebanese describe themselves as Christians, and most of these are Catholic.¹⁹

Is it possible that there are more Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) in the Epicenter than these numbers reflect? Yes. As a result of satellite TV and radio ministries -- as well as advanced and creative use of Internet evangelism -- Arab ministries in the region are seeing a growing number of Muslims coming to faith in Jesus Christ. That said, the precise numbers of MBBs are difficult to assess and thus only conservative numbers have been presented here.²⁰

What is significant is not the precise numbers but the trend lines. We are seeing more prayer by the believers in the Epicenter, more prayer among the nations for the Church in the Mideast, more boldness amongst local believers to share the Gospel, more use of technology to reach more people with the Gospel, unprecedented openness among Jews and Arabs, and more Jews and Arabs actually placing their faith in Christ.

Thus, despite such darkness in the region, we should be encouraged by the clear evidence of God's faithfulness. The Lord Jesus Christ is building His Church and He is refusing to allow the gates of Hell to prevail against it, just as He promised.

END NOTES

¹ See Erin Cunningham and Heba Habib, "Video shows purported beheading of Egyptian Christians in Libya," *Washington Post*, February 15, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/video-shows-purported-beheading-of-egyptian-christians-in-libya/2015/02/15/b8d0f092-b548-11e4-bc30-a4e75503948a_story.html?utm_term=.fd2b98a2a2cf; "Syrians Beleaguering Christians," BBC, February 25, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22270455>; Alissa J. Rubin, "ISIS Forces Last Iraqi Christians to Flee Mosul," *New York Times*, July 18, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/19/world/middleeast/isis-forces-last-iraqi-christians-to-flee-mosul.html>; Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, "John Kerry: ISIS Is Responsible for Genocide Against Christians," *Christianity Today*, March 17, 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2016/march/do-christians-face-genocide-isis-john-kerry-syria-iraq.html>.

² See "Genocide Against Christians in the Middle East: A Report Submitted to Secretary of State John Kerry by The Knights of Columbus and In Defense of Christians," March 9, 2016, <http://www.stopthechristiangenocide.org/scg/en/resources/Genocide-report.pdf>; Kelley Beaucar Vlahos, "Report details ISIS atrocities against Christians, presses State for 'genocide' label," Fox News, March 10, 2016, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2016/03/10/report-details-isis-atrocities-against-christians-presses-state-for-genocide-label.html>; Andreas Thonhauser, "Justice for the Persecuted – Building a Future for Iraqi Christians," Alliance Defending Freedom, October 4, 2016, <http://adfinternational.org/detailspages/blog-details/commentary/2016/10/04/justice-for-the-persecuted-building-a-future-for-iraqi-christians>; "Christian Workers in Syria Crucified, Beheaded," Christian Aid Mission, October 1, 2015, http://www.christianaid.org/News/2015/mir20151001.aspx?utm_source=MorningStar+News&utm_campaign=34e2b79b1b-Syria_terrors10_2_2015&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_6e3978492c-34e2b79b1b-78080769; Steve Almassy, "Group: ISIS 'crucifies' men in public in Syrian towns," CNN, June 30, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/06/29/world/meast/syria-reported-crucifixions/index.html>.

³ The 2017 numbers were provided by Dr. Erez Soref, president of Israel College of the Bible, who has been conducting extensive research – including an original survey of Messianic congregations in 2017 – for a forthcoming study, "The Messianic-Jewish Movement In Modern Israel." The numbers include mostly Jewish believers -- native-born Hebrew-speakers, Russian-speakers who emigrated from the former Soviet Union, Amharic-speakers who emigrated from Ethiopia, and a range of other Jewish believers who have emigrated from the U.S., Great Britain, South Africa, New Zealand and numerous other countries. They also include Gentile believers married to Jewish believers, and some Gentile believers who are working or studying in the Land and choose to attend Messianic congregations. *Operation World* puts the total number of Evangelical believers in Israel at 31,045. <http://www.operationworld.org/isra>. These numbers represents important growth. In 1967, for example, there were only a few hundred Jewish followers of Jesus in the Land, according to Messianic Jewish leaders in Israel interviewed in 2005 and 2006. See *Epicenter* (2006 edition), p. 201.

⁴ Emails with Rev. Munir Kakish, chairman of the Palestinian Evangelical Council of Churches, August 26, 2017. These numbers also represent important growth. In 1967, there were only a few hundred Arab Evangelicals in Israel, according to interviews conducted with Arab pastors in 2008 and 2009. See *Inside The Revolution*, p. 402.

⁵ Emails with Rev. Munir Kakish, chairman of the Palestinian Evangelical Council of Churches, August 26, 2017. *Operation World* puts the number of Palestinian Evangelicals at 4,116. However, many Palestinian believers have moved to the U.S., Europe or elsewhere due to the very difficult security, political, economic and social environment in the West Bank and Gaza. <http://www.operationworld.org/pale>.

⁶ Interviews with Arab pastors and ministry leaders in 2016 and 2017.

⁷ Emails with Rev. Munir Kakish, chairman of the Palestinian Evangelical Council of Churches, August 26, 2017. The good news is that Palestinians are coming to faith in Jesus Christ, though not in large numbers. However, again, however, many are moving out of the Palestinian Authority to live in the U.S., Canada, Europe and the Gulf due to the many challenges related to living as a believer in the West Bank and Gaza. Thus, the diaspora community of Palestinian Evangelicals is significantly larger than those living in the P.A. It's also worth noting that while the vast majority of Palestinians are Muslims, a total of some 45,000 Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are self-described Christians. Most of these are Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and other historic denominations. That said, thousands of historic Christians have moved abroad, as well.

⁸ According to Dr. Imad Shahedeh, President of the Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary, the conservative number is about 10,000 (email correspondence on September 1, 2017). According to Kamal Iskander Khlaif, former Director of Life Agape in Jordan, the number is between 13,000 and 15,000. According to *Operation World*, the total number of Jordanian believers is 19,116 (though this could include some who have relocated to the West.) <http://www.operationworld.org/JORD> These numbers suggest important growth. In 2009, Jordanian pastors and ministry leaders indicated there were only 5,000 to 10,000 born again Jordanians. See my 2009 book, *Inside The Revolution*, p. 403-404.

⁹ Emails with Dr. Imad Shahedeh, President of the Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary, September 1, 2017.

¹⁰ *Operation World* reports the total number of all people who describe themselves as Christians in Jordan is 144,982. <http://www.operationworld.org/JORD>

¹¹ This number includes Coptic Orthodox Christians, Protestants, Catholics and other historic denominations. *Operation World* puts the total number of Egyptians who describe themselves as Christians at 10,838,069. <http://www.operationworld.org/EGYP>.

¹² Emails with Dr. Andrea Zaki Stephanous, President of the Protestant Churches of Egypt, August 28, 2017. This appears to be a solid, credible number, though some Egyptian pastors and ministry leaders put the total number of Evangelical Egyptians higher. In *Inside The Revolution*, I reported the figure of 2.5 million (see p. 395), based on interviews with Egyptian Christian leaders in 2008 and 2009. *Operation World* puts the total number of Evangelicals at 3.28 million. <http://www.operationworld.org/EGYP>

¹³ Emails with Arab pastors in Syria who wished to remain anonymous for security reasons, August 30, 2017. *Operation World* puts the overall number of Syrian Evangelicals at 23,663. <http://www.operationworld.org/syri>. These numbers suggest important growth. In 2009, Syrian pastors and ministry leaders told me there were only 4,000 to 5,000 born again believers in Syria. See *Inside The Revolution*, p. 403.

¹⁴ Sophia Kuby, a human rights expert in Germany, wrote, "The number of Christians has dropped from 1.25 million to 500,000 in Syria...in just a few years." See Sophia Kuby, "Calling ISIS mass killing of Christians what it is: genocide," Alliance Defending Freedom, January 20, 2016, <http://www.adfmedia.org/News/PRDetail/9844>. These numbers includes Syrian Orthodox, Chaldean Orthodox, Catholics, and other historic denominations.

¹⁵ Emails with three Evangelical Christian pastors in Iraq who wished to remain anonymous for security reasons, August 31, 2017.

¹⁶ Ibid. *Operation World* indicates the total number of Iraqi Evangelicals is 53,371. <http://www.operationworld.org/IRAQ>. Some Iraqi pastors and ministry leaders believe the total number of Iraqi Evangelical believers is higher, perhaps 70,000. See *Inside The Revolution*, p. 400. The 2003 war, subsequent insurgency, and the rise (and demise) of the Islamic State created conditions for many Iraqis both to turn to faith in Christ as well as to flee the country for their safety and well-being. Such dynamics seriously complicate making precise numerical assessments.

¹⁷ Former Congressman Frank Wolf, a widely respected leader on religious freedom issues, wrote, "In 2003, the Christians in Iraq numbered 1.5 million. Today, that number has decreased to what most estimate is 250,000, although some argue the number is down to 150,000. I believe the number is between 200,000 and 300,000." See Rep. Frank Wolf, *Northern Iraq: 2017*, a field report he wrote for the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative, August 16, 2017, <http://www.21wilberforce.org/am-site/media/iraq-report-2.pdf>. Sophia Kuby similarly wrote, "The number of Christians has dropped from...1.4 million to less than 275,000 in Iraq in just a few years." See Sophia Kuby, "Calling ISIS mass killing of Christians what it is: genocide," Alliance Defending Freedom, January 20, 2016, <http://www.adfmedia.org/News/PRDetail/9844>. These numbers includes Chaldean Orthodox, Catholics, Protestants and other historic denominations. *Operation World* put the total number of historic Iraqi Christians at 500,320, but given the ravages of war and ISIS this number is outdated. <http://www.operationworld.org/IRAQ>

¹⁸ Evangelical leaders in Lebanon indicate the current number is about 15,000 (emails with leaders who wished to remain anonymous for security reasons, September 7, 2017). *Operation World* indicates the number is 21,410. <http://www.operationworld.org/LEBA> These figures represent important growth. In 2009, Lebanon Christian leaders said there were about 10,000 Evangelical Christians in the country. See *Inside The Revolution*, p. 404.

¹⁹ *Operation World* put the total number of Lebanese Christians from all historic denominations at 1,360,190, or nearly 32% of the population.

²⁰ Conversations with dozens of Arab pastors and ministry leaders throughout the region in 2016 and 2017.