

MID-EAST e-NEWS

An electronic journal of the Middle East, for those who want to be informed.

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Last month

Aug.

1 F

2 S

3 S

4 M

5 T

6 W Israel releases 334 prisoners

7 T Jordan's Iraq embassy bombed

8 F

9 S

10 S

11 M

12 T Suicide bombs kill 2 Israelis

13 W

14 T

15 F Israel to release 4 cities to PNA

16 S

17 S

18 M

19 T Jerusalem bus bomb

UN HQ in Baghdad bombed

20 W

21 T 'Chemical Ali' captured

Israel assassinates Abu Shanab

22 F

23 S

24 S Bomb attempt on Al Hakim

25 M 2 bombs in Bombay

26 T

27 W

28 T PNA freezes Hamas bank

accounts

29 F 100 killed by car bomb in Najaf

– including Al Hakim

30 S

31 S

Welcome

Ahla w Sahla to this first issue of news from the Middle East. This journal was inspired, on a recent working visit to the USA, by the interest shown in news from the Middle East, and the ignorance of the issues involved. It is a consequence of contrasts, between the eyewitness reports received by those of us living here and the nightly TV news endured by viewers in the USA; between the stated aims of the US administration in Iraq and the claims vocalized locally that the West wants to control the whole of the Mid-East; between the pleas for justice by homeless, landless, Palestinian Arabs and the desire of evangelicals in the West to see Israel established in peace.

The region is a study in complexities. Understanding the Middle East (the term is a British invention of the early 20th century) is fraught with confusion. Through this journal we hope to shed light on how fundamental differences between Arabs and the West can be a source of misunderstanding. We seek to show how these differences (tribalism, religion, nationalism, etc.) impact the common people, leaving us with hope for humanitarian improvements across the region, but also with a recognition of the differences that are involved.

This journal is written from an evangelical Christian perspective, but even this term requires qualification. (See the inside article *Who are the Christians?* for more background.) We teach no doctrinal position, but that the Bible is absolutely true. This necessitates, for us, a recognition of the salvation from sin offered by Christ *to the whole world*, but also that many will refuse it. From the aspect of news gathering, we want people to be informed: our aim is to inform. We seek to provide truth, knowing that God is the God of truth (Psalm 65:16). In days when people seem to prefer to be told what to think, we will seek to avoid doing that. Bare facts, however, are wasted seed unless presented in a context, and so we will do what is necessary to explain their significance. We will endeavor to do this without opinionizing, or taking sides.



It may challenge us to look at the Middle East with new eyes, but surely – unless we have become lazy in our faith – that is necessary sometimes. The events in the Middle East these days already challenge our faith. Hopefully we will be able to see that God is in total control in the region, and is working according to His plan – though not necessarily to our perception of it. Regarding our participation in, and influence on the complex affairs of the Middle East, a pastor once said, in a similar context, “*Friend, I am not in management, but in sales.*” We can learn to be informed observers, observant pray-ers, and prayerful witnesses.

Peter Clark

On Mount Nebo, facing across the Jordan valley, this monument commemorates Moses raising a bronze snake on a pole to heal the Israelites. (Num. 21:8) Mount Nebo is where Moses died and was buried by God. From this point one can see Jerusalem, Jericho, the Dead Sea and the Jordan River.

Who are the Christians?

These days people are asking, as if the group only recently came into being, *Who are the Shiites?* It is an important question, but one which we will postpone answering until the next issue. In this issue we want to address a similar question. Much confusion can be caused by misunderstanding of terms, and there is a variety of meanings behind the term *Christian*, so it is necessary for us to be totally aware of the various ways in which the word is used in the Middle East.

The word *Christian* was a Greek appellation for those who believed in Christ, first applied to the disciples in Antioch in the first century. (Acts 11:26) For many years the Christians were a distinct sect, and the term was exclusive, usually derogatory. When Nero wanted scapegoats for the burning of Rome it was Christians he persecuted, and for centuries thereafter those who believed in Jesus Christ were recognized by that name.

At the time of Constantine's conversion the institutional persecution ceased. Christianity gained acceptance initially as a minority sect which quickly became socially acceptable – it became easier to be a Christian than not. As this acceptance grew, the faith became institutionalized, becoming the official religion of the empire. Quite soon, even in Constantine's lifetime (c.274-337 AD), there were distinct belief-systems within Christianity.

The consequence of this was that it became possible to be a Christian in name, when neither beliefs nor practice affirmed it. This 'nominal Christianity' is known in the west, particularly where the church-state relationship is tight, but is a fact of life in the Middle East, where the birth certificate recognizes the person's faith as being inherited, rather than a product of conversion. This is markedly different to the situation in much of the US, where the dynamism of active Christianity has polarized opinion, and where many non-believers would actively reject the term.

Today, in the Middle East, Christians comprise up to 10% of the population of any particular country,

with Lebanon being the highest at up to 30%.

There are two perspectives on this distinction between institutional (or *confessional*) Christianity and Christianity as a personal walk with God. One view is that from the outside looking in: Christian Arabs are a distinct community from other Arabs; Christians in the Arab world consist of *nominal* and *evangelical* (as in the West); Christians in most Arab countries are a minority, suffering in or accommodating to society in varying degree; and Christians themselves are divided denominationally – usually between Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant – with evangelicals being a significant proportion of the third. This does not disallow the presence of "believers" in either of the *ancient Churches* (Orthodox or Catholic).

In the Arab world, or the wider Islamic world, the distinction between religion and state is not made. An Islamic country is as Islamic in government as it is in religion, with main differences being the strictness of application of *Sharia* Law. Therefore observers in the Middle East, and Muslims in particular, do not readily distinguish between Christianity as a personal belief, and the West as a Christian culture. Christianity is what Christians do. This applies equally to the horrors of the Crusades and the horrors of the Holocaust, the immorality of pornographic media and the scanty clothing worn by Western tourists. All of these were/are perpetrated by Christians – because they are from countries where the dominant belief is seen to be Christian – and therefore this is what Christianity is.

No wonder, then, that America's intervention in Middle Eastern affairs is met with trepidation. Arabs, Muslims anyway, understand recognition of a government as identification with a religion.

Draw your own conclusions. This topic will always be relevant in the Middle East.

Word of mouth...

Visitors from Iraq tell of new churches being established around the country. One church has around 350 attending at a recent service.

* * *

Numerous electricity blackouts plague Iraq's population. This is not surprising since there is a demand of 6,000MW. Even fully operational, before the war, all the power stations in Iraq could only provide 4,000MW.

* * *

Interest in the gospel is not waning in the Middle East. One evangelical group has had to remodel to allow space for a counseling room, so many are interested in what Christ has to offer.

* * *

A church fellowship in has a mixed congregation of converts from Jewish and Arabic faiths. These meet under the pastorship of an Arab believer.

* * *

The lack of a telecommunications network in Iraq has been hindering aid organizations. A large measure of relief has been provided by MCI, which has set up a transmitter and provided free mobile phone access. Users can make free phone calls that are linked directly – via satellite – to their NY exchange.

* * *

Within two weeks of the American occupation of Baghdad full rail services were restored. It is possible to travel from north to south – Mosul to Basra – on the un-airconditioned trains. The journey from Baghdad to Basra costs just 1000 dinars (about \$1.50 depending on the exchange rate).

* * *

Please write. Your comments and questions are valuable to us. If you need clarification we will try to do that in succeeding articles. We cannot promise to reply personally to every correspondent.

How far back does it go?

One problem with discussing the Mid-East peace process is finding a baseline. Where do we go back to, to say "this is the status quo," this is where we start, this is the point in history that we would like to reconstruct. Two issues are in our minds when we do this: one, the debate over the rights to the land of the Palestinians and the Israelis; and two, the issue of *occupation* (an uncertain term, but one which has now been used by Palestinian and Israeli leaders). This issue of e-NEWS we will consider the first, since our response to this will affect any consideration of the second. This discussion will continue in future issues of e-NEWS.

We could start by looking back to the most recent upheaval, which would be 1967, when Jordan got caught up in the Six-Day War, and lost the West Bank to Israel. (The 1973, Yom Kippur War did not really involve Jordan - which had been misled by its neighbors in 1967 - and was mostly fought in the Golan and in Sinai). However, explaining the issues of 1967 depends upon our recognizing the consequences of 1948, so this is where we will begin.

After World War II, Britain realized that it could not afford to remain in conflict-torn Palestine (the geographic area between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River) and in 1947 announced that it would pull out of its *Mandate* by May 14th, 1948. The United Nations prepared a plan which would divide Palestine into two regions, Jewish and Arab. The map illustrates this.

Palestinian Arabs, presented with a plan that would transfer a large proportion of their land to the Jews, refused to accept the Partition, as did the neighboring Arab countries.

By the time May 14th came along, the various Zionist groups that had been working with the British administration had fought for and occupied the key cities of Tiberias and Haifa. During April fighting also occurred around

the perimeter of the zone allocated to the Arabs, with the consequence that by the time an armistice was in place (in 1949) the Arab Christian cities of Galilee were all acquired by Israel, along with a large portion of the Gaza region, and the periphery of what became known as the West Bank. All the fighting that occurred was in the regions allocated by the United Nations to the Arabs, and was lost by them to the newly founded nation of Israel. The second map shows how the new borders appeared.

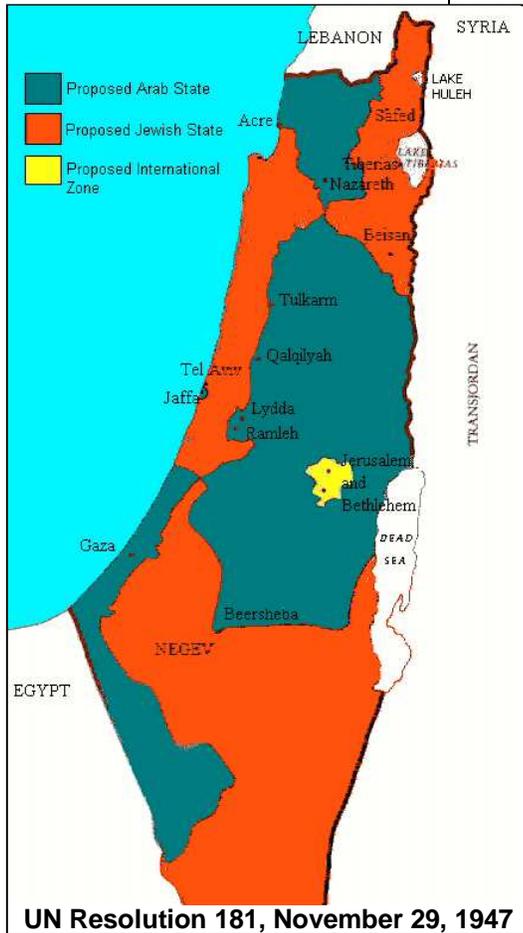
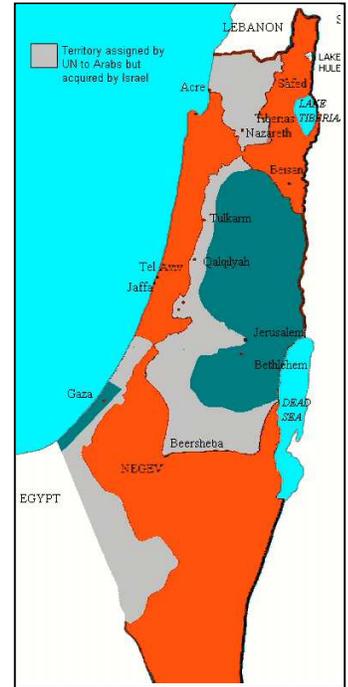
At this time many Arabs chose to remain where they lived, under Israeli government. These *Arab-Isrealis* have had seats in the Israeli Knesset, and vote along-side Jewish Israeli citizens. Other Arabs responded to atrocities such as that at Deir Yassin by fleeing as refugees to Lebanon (from Jaffa/Haifa and Tiberias) or the newly-independent *Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan*.

The consequences of 1948, then, were that hundreds of thousands of Arab refugees were to be found in the neighboring countries. Their homes and farms had been occupied and they had not received any compensation from the new residents.

The territory that had been allocated to the Arab Palestinians had been defended by Arab Army, which was primarily comprised of the Jordanian Arab Legion. (Incidentally, this was commanded by the British General, John Glubb, known as *Glubb Pasha*). Having defended what remained of the West Bank, Jordan annexed it in 1950, under King Abdullah I (grandfather of King Hussein, whose son, Abdullah II, is now king of Jordan).

There was strong objection from many Palestinians, (who had been agitating for independence even while under Turkish rule – before the British acquired the Mandate) to the Hashemites ruling their land. In July of 1951 it was a Palestinian who assassinated King Abdullah as he left the Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. His grandson, Hussein, was shot too, but the bullet ricocheted off a medal on his chest.

Next issue: Causes and consequence of the 1967 loss of the West Bank.



Mesopotamia, Arabia, Levant?

The region which will be the focus of this e-journal is known by many different terms. Some of them are geographical, others racial, and still others are political conveniences introduced – and then superseded – in the absence of convenient alternatives.

In general the region is bordered by the Mediterranean Sea on the west, the Red Sea on the south and the Persian Gulf on the east. For practical purposes we can assume that Egypt is included, as is Turkey – which will form our northern border – and also Iran. In

e-NEWS we will not ignore related issues arising in adjacent countries to these. Within this region the two rivers *Euphrates* and *Tigris* are significant. The region between them is what we know of as **Mesopotamia**, which was the home of some of the earliest civilizations. Sumer and Babylon were centered in what is now Iraq and Assyria stretched over the present border of Turkey.

Arabia is the land of the Arabs. This includes all of the Arabian peninsula (bordered by the

Persian and Red Sea Gulfs) and stretches to include Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. Turkey is not Arab, but a conglomerate of Turkmen peoples originally from east of the Caspian Sea. Similarly, Iran is not Arab but Persian, also with its own language, Farsi. And Egyptians, while speaking Arabic (as do all of the Muslim countries of North Africa) do not consider themselves Arabs, but Egyptians.

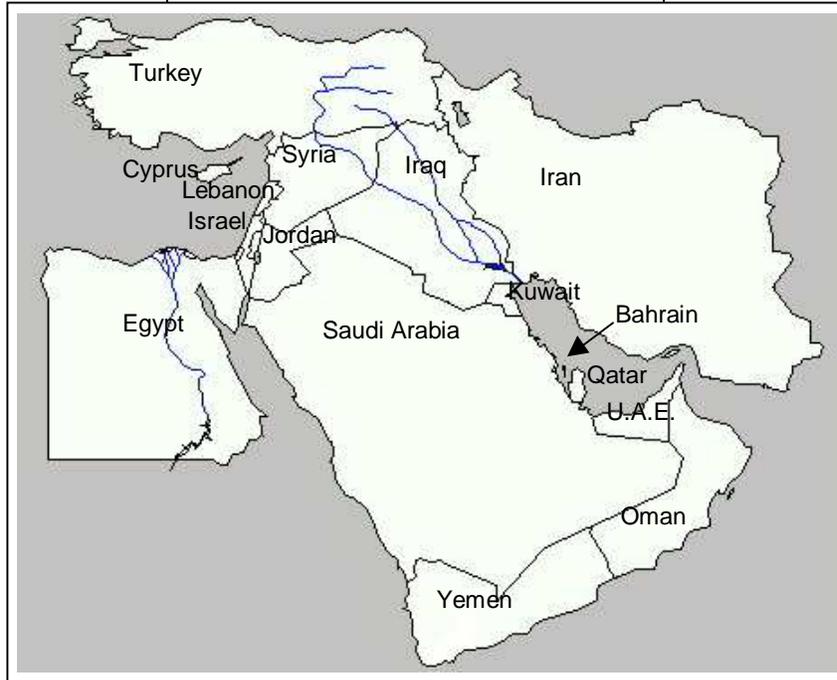
As European countries became interested in the Middle East – Napoleon attempted to occupy the region – they used the term

Levant to describe the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. “Lever” means ‘to rise’ and refers to the rising of the sun. At times the term has included the southern coast of Turkish as well as Egypt, but was primarily concerned with the Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Jordan.

Palestine is a geographical term, referring to the region between the Red Sea and the southern Lebanese border marked by the Litani river. The Romans in the second century gave the name *Palestina Prima* to the region, with

different portions of what is now Jordan being known as the *Decapolis*, *Perea* and *Arabia Petraea*.

At the turn of the 20th Century the European countries were concerned with the imminent break-up of the Turkish Ottoman Empire. To describe this region British politicians began referring to the region as the **Middle East**. Their main interests were in India, their *East*, as in the British East India Company. In the USA these days the abbreviated “Mid-East” is more common.



One of the outcomes of the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords was that the Palestine Authority was able to issue its own postage stamps. These were only legal for internal use, and therefore do not have a wide currency. Here are some examples.

