Chapter 8

Challenges to Establishing the Church in the Middle East

James A. Toronto

It has been my good fortune to have spent ten years living in the Middle East with my family in a variety of settings: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and, more recently, Jordan, where I served as the director of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' Center for Cultural and Educational Affairs. This chapter is based primarily on research and personal observations from the time I have spent living in the Islamic world.

When people ask me about the Middle East, it is usually with the idea in mind that the Church is making no headway at all there. The question is usually posed somewhat like this, what are we ever going to do about the Middle East? The good news, I reply, is that the Church is already doing quite a lot in the Middle East. We have established a presence there and built many positive relationships in government and academic circles. The not-so-good news, of course, is that we still have a long way to go, and that seems to be a theme for all the areas we have discussed in this book. Part of my response to that question is always to ask, which part of the Middle East or Islamic world are you referring to?

The Middle East, even though we tend to think of it as a monolithic, homogeneous bloc of nations, is in fact quite diverse in composition. It is therefore crucial to consider each area or each country individually in order to assess the prospects for the Church. That is what I have tried to do in my role during the past three years as adviser for Middle Eastern affairs to the Europe East Area President, Elder Charles Didier (and before him, Elder Dennis B. Neuenschwander). The theme I have emphasized over and over is that we must look at each country separately and avoid sweeping generalizations that prevent our having a clear picture of the legal, political, and religious realities in the region. In this chapter I will discuss the context, current activities, and prospects of the Church in the Middle East.

Historical, Political, and Religious Context

I would like to summarize some characteristics of the Middle East that have impacted the Church's ability to operate openly and to share its message. All the countries of the Middle East, with the exception of Israel, are Muslim. All are also Arab nations except for Turkey, Israel, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The Muslim countries all share some aspects of religious law and practice but are extremely diverse in ethnic, linguistic, political, and legal orientation. The countries of the Middle East are developing countries economically and politically. Most of them are less than sixty years old with newly emerging legal and political systems. They have not had much time to develop their national institutions. Various systems of governance are represented. There are oligarchic monarchies: fiefdoms of ruling elites in countries of the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf area. There are also constitutional monarchies in Jordan and Morocco. Another category are the Middle-Eastern-style democracies that have the rough form and rhetoric of a democracy but not the substance of Western democracies with full human rights, freedom of speech and press, and political enfranchisement for all citizens. I include under this rubric Egypt, Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Syria, Iraq, Tunisia, and Algeria.

All these countries are going through a transitional period in which they are trying to reconcile modern notions of religious pluralism and human rights with traditional legal and social systems. This creates a kind of hybrid system of law. Most of them have adopted a Western legal code dating from the colonial period to deal with constitutional and civil matters. At the same time, there exists a system of traditional tribal law and Islamic religious law, called *shariʿa*, which governs criminal, personal, and family matters. These hybrid systems of legal thought and practice create tensions and ambiguities that make it difficult to define the relationship between church and state.

All countries in the Middle East, because of the tenuous nature of their fledgling political and economic systems, have an obsession with maintaining security and stability. Though most constitutions guarantee religious liberty and tolerance for religious minorities, including some sort of statement to that effect, issues of security and stability always supersede those of religious freedom.

Political turmoil and economic deprivation are other characteristics of these countries. Life is chaotic and unpredictable. Institutions are inefficient and unreliable, and therefore personal influence with authority figures (the term in Arabic for this is *wasta*) is a way of life. This is the informal but well-established norm for getting things done when institutional processes are unreliable. Protocols and procedures for obtaining basic human rights, if they exist at all, are often circumvented. Instead, nepotism, influence buying, and cronyism—all related to the norms of a kinship society that new political ideals have not yet supplanted—are widely practiced.

Another aspect of life in the Middle East is a spirit of rivalry and jealousy between the three monotheistic or Abrahamic religions. I am referring here to Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. These hostilities between the three great religions are widespread and deeply rooted historically. Moreover, there are internal tensions in each of these religious communities: competing ideologies, interpretations, and factions. For example, the differences between Shiʿite and Sunni

over who should lead the Islamic community have led to conflict and bloodshed during the pilgrimage in Mecca. In Judaism, the struggle between the orthodox Jews and the secular Jews has also turned violent at times. Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated as a result of that conflict. There have been divisions and strife in the Christian community in Jerusalem over who controls the holy sites. At Easter time in 1999, fighting broke out between rival Christian sects at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre over who controls access to the sanctuary. Another dimension of this inter- and intrareligious conflict is the question of proselyting. Though not explicitly prohibited in most of the legal codes, proselyting by non-Muslims is nevertheless proscribed because of concerns about preserving political and social stability. Religious minorities are allowed to practice their religion and hold worship services as long as these activities are low key and do not involve proselyting among Muslims, the majority religious community.

The Church's status and prospects are influenced by the interplay of all these factors. Like other Christian groups in general, our presence and activities are limited because of social and sometimes legal restrictions against proselyting. The old, well-established, legally recognized churches have their roots in nineteenth-century missionary work, carried out under the relative tolerance of the Ottoman Empire. New religious groups, who came in after the post–World War II revolutions, have encountered great difficulty in achieving legal status. In other words, if a church was already present in a country when it was established and the new constitution was drawn up, then it was recognized by the government. On the other hand, if a church (such as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) came in after the late 1940s or early '50s, then it generally encountered many obstacles to legal recognition.

The Church had missionaries and congregations in the nineteenth century, as did other Christian groups, in Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine (which today is Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza). Because of our doctrine of gathering, everyone migrated to

Utah and the congregations withered away, so we missed the wave. I will use that phrase coined by surfers because the metaphor captures the notion of historical waves of opportunity that come along from time to time in the Middle East. We missed the wave in the early post–World War II era that allowed Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Protestants, and Seventh-day Adventists to be recognized in Middle Eastern countries. I believe deeply in the doctrine of gathering, and I think it was divinely inspired and thus the right thing to do at the time. I am merely pointing out that there was a cost in terms of our presence in the Middle East today. If some of those congregations had managed to survive, we would likely be recognized along with the Catholics, the Seventh-day Adventists, and various Protestant groups.

Most of the opposition we have received in our efforts to achieve full legal standing has come from these old established Christian communities, not from the Muslims. In the Middle East, marriages, inheritance issues, and funeral rites are handled exclusively by religious communities, not the government or private sector. To have legal sanction to carry out these functions in society is vital for political and economic reasons, and the established churches are therefore loathe to relinquish any part of their traditional power base to newer churches. When new churches, like ours, cannot achieve full legal status, church members are forced to turn to non-LDS religious officials to handle their marriage, inheritance, and funeral issues. Non-recognition also makes it difficult, in some cases impossible, to hold religious services, purchase or lease real estate, and open bank accounts.

The Church's approach has been to do careful research in each country, identify the unique obstacles that each national system presents, and then work with representatives of government, academe, and business to systematically address these issues. This has required some flexibility and reordering of priorities for Church leadership. An example of this was something Elder Neuenschwander told me during a meeting in Frankfurt: "Our goal in the Middle East is not

growth through traditional proselyting and conversion, but establishing a viable presence, building bridges of trust and friendship, and promoting goodwill." In other words, the Church is willing in some circumstances to use its resources to support humanitarian and academic activities rather than proselyting efforts. I think that is quite an extraordinary approach given the Church's historical and doctrinal emphasis on missionary work. Church leaders are saying that in areas where there are severe restrictions and obstacles we will go slow and seek to establish a presence without evangelization.

It was in response to the reality of these political, social, and legal constraints that the Church adopted a policy of not proselyting among Muslims. This policy, formulated during the early 1990s, prohibits teaching or baptizing Muslims who live in the United States or Europe but are planning to return to the Middle East. The premise for this policy is that Muslims who join the Church and go back to a Middle Eastern society find it almost impossible to honor their covenants and practice their religion.

Current Status of the Church in the Middle East

I would like to say a few things about the current situation in the Middle East and where we stand now. The following examples will illustrate how some of the general trends that I discussed above directly affect the Church's activities. In Middle Eastern countries, there is no legally defined procedure for church recognition, and this fact creates many ambiguities for us. The more religiously progressive governments like Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt advocate religious tolerance and pluralism, but they refuse to provide the legal and structural means to achieve that pluralism for fear of inciting militant religious groups or offending powerful religious elites, thereby destabilizing the country.

The challenge facing the Church in these circumstances is how to proceed toward establishing a legal presence when the process for accomplishing this is either poorly defined or nonexistent. There has been much discussion of President Gordon B. Hinckley's statement

that the Church always goes through the front door when seeking to establish itself in a country. The question I often found myself asking in Middle Eastern countries is, where is the front door? What I found was that often there was no front door through which new churches could achieve legal status, or if there was one, I found that nobody ever used it because it led nowhere.

For instance, in Jordan the Church has permission from the government, based on a formal agreement signed in 1989, to sponsor cultural and educational activities. But we do not have permission to hold formal religious services. We were advised by our Jordanian attorneys that we probably should avoid holding any religious meetings until we could obtain a royal decree recognizing the Church. An appeal directly to His Majesty the King was the only viable approach, they said. Other Jordanian advisers assured us there were alternative doors through which legal recognition could be obtained, and they all had a friend or relative who would be glad to help us. In the meantime, the Church has grown slowly but steadily. We have three branches of the Church in Jordan, about one hundred members, many of whom are Arab Christians who joined the Church in Jordan after hearing about us by word of mouth from friends and relatives. We have four missionary couples who work with members but do not engage in proselyting. Legally, however, our position is tenuous. While we do not have formal permission to hold religious services, the royal family has created an atmosphere of religious tolerance and has on many occasions expressed support for non-Muslim religious groups holding meetings as long as they do not cause problems. So in Jordan the Church operates in kind of a gray area—a legal twilight zone in which we are not quite sure what our real status is or what the approach is to achieving full legal status.

I had the opportunity to accompany Elder Jeffrey R. Holland and Elder Charles Didier when they met with Crown Prince Hassan in the Royal Palace in Amman. They presented a petition to him from the First Presidency requesting formal recognition for the Church. This meeting was the culmination of much hard work

and years of effort, and this was the big day. After Elder Holland explained the purpose of our visit, the crown prince replied with a puzzled look on his face, "But what is the problem? You are pushing on an open door. Everyone enjoys religious freedom here. What is it that you want that you don't already have?" Elder Holland turned to me and said, "Jim, please explain for us why, at the nuts-and-bolts level, the Church needs to have recognition." It was fascinating and a bit troubling to see that in Crown Prince Hassan's mind, religious freedom for minorities was not even an issue. I think this attitude is characteristic of many liberal Western-educated political elites not only in Jordan but in most countries in the Islamic Middle East. There is a naive sense that rhetorically supporting religious rights for all religious groups actually establishes those rights.

In Egypt political instability has been the primary force impeding our efforts for Church recognition. In 1981 the Church's petition for recognition was awaiting President Anwar Sadat's final approval when he was assassinated. For almost twenty years now, the matter has been in a state of limbo; no one has been able to figure out what to do next. When I went to Egypt to help out with this process, we were asked by the government to affiliate legally with one of the four recognized Christian groups, one of the old established churches. That led to a rather unusual situation in which I was going to the Catholic, Protestant, and Seventh-day Adventist communities in Cairo and saying, "We would like you to affirm our right to worship and allow us to affiliate with you legally." Most of the church leaders with whom I spoke were quite understanding, and the Seventh-day Adventists, in particular, were anxious to help us because of their strong advocacy of religious liberty in the international arena. In the end, Latter-day Saint leaders decided that pursuing legal recognition through diplomatic channels would be more beneficial in the long run than an awkward affiliation with another church.

Turkey is officially a secular country that fiercely promotes a Western-style separation of church and state. It is not illegal for

non-Muslim groups to proselyte: the constitution states that as long as the public order is not disturbed, people can share their religious views with others. The question, though, is what does it mean not to disturb the public order? The situation in neighboring Greece is instructive in this regard. There, freedom of religion is also guaranteed, but when our missionaries go out door to door, people occasionally get upset and call the police, who put the missionaries in jail. Then the Church attorney comes and arranges their release because they are on solid ground legally and have violated no laws. I think the same dynamic is at play in Turkey. In other words, legally it is permissible to proselyte, but socially and culturally, at the street level, the presence of missionaries in a society dominated by one powerful religious tradition (Greek Orthodox in Greece; Islam in Turkey) stirs up trouble, at least for the first decade or so after a mission opens. It thus becomes an issue of trying to decide if we are willing to send young missionaries to face in Turkey what they have experienced in Greece, continual harassment and occasional imprisonment.

Israel is a fascinating example. It is illegal only to induce someone to convert to another religion by offering them money. The Church signed a strict nonproselyting agreement with the Israeli government to defuse tensions between secular Jews who supported building the BYU Jerusalem Center and religious Jews who insisted that the Jerusalem Center would promote a spiritual holocaust in Israel. We were swept up in a larger debate among Israelis over the place of religion in a state struggling to reconcile the tensions inherent in a political system that proclaims itself both secular-democratic and religious-Jewish in nature.

In Dubai (United Arab Emirates) the Church has gained recognition by fiat due mostly to the efforts of a great Latter-day Saint, Joseph Platt. His efforts are reminiscent of Ammon's work among the Lamanites characterized by a desire to live among, understand, and serve the people (see Alma 17–20). Brother Platt and his family lived in the Gulf and worked for many years with the royal fam-

ily, who came to regard him as a trusted friend. When he raised the problem that the Latter-day Saint branch faced in holding meetings, the shaikh wrote a note on official letterhead granting permission to hold services and to have our own building.

Issues and Prospects

One critical issue at this point in the Church's development in the Middle East is the problem of missionary emigration. My intent here is not to criticize but to be realistic about a part of the world that is difficult for the Church and to help us gain deeper understanding of the challenges we must confront. The Church unintentionally encourages immigration into European and North American countries because of the current policy of calling missionaries from developing countries to serve in industrialized nations. We do not intend to attract "rice Christians,"[1] but sometimes this policy, in places like Jordan, Albania, Ukraine, and other developing countries, has that very effect. For example, during the past four years six missionaries have been called from Jordan to serve in the United States and England. Of these six, only one has returned to live permanently in Jordan. The others have stayed in or gone back to their mission countries to work illegally.

As a result, there are young men lining up in Jordan because they have seen previous missionaries leave and find jobs in the United States or England, thus fulfilling the dream of many Jordanians. Sometimes bishops in the U.S. have helped these young men and women find work, which is a violation of their tourist or missionary visas. To the bishops' credit, they usually are unaware of these legal problems with visas. Those of us who work with the members in the Middle East have suggested that perhaps missionaries could be called to places like Nigeria or the Philippines or other developing

---

1.   The traditional metaphor referring to those who convert from one religion to another primarily for economic reasons.

areas where economic conditions are similar to, or worse than, those in Jordan. Then when these elders and sisters arrive home after their missions, instead of being discontent and wistfully longing for the greener pastures they experienced in the mission field, they will have an attitude of, "I think I'll stay here. My country looks mighty good to me." They would come to view their home countries as comparatively pleasant and appealing and thus be more willing to stay in their native land and anchor the Church rather than migrate to the West. I also think that working as missionaries in smaller branches rather than in well-developed, smoothly functioning wards and stakes will prepare them more effectively to deal with the kinds of issues and problems they will encounter as leaders in their own branches after returning home.

My point is that this has become a pressing issue in strengthening our tenuous relationships in the Middle East. The Church is gaining a reputation among people in Jordan as a vehicle for emigration. As the Jordanian government and U.S. embassy take note of this, our efforts to establish a respected, legal, long-term presence in Jordan and surrounding Middle Eastern countries will be hampered.

I want to share one last comment about relations between religious communities in the Middle East and the implications for establishing a viable long-term presence. The influence of militant religious communities will wax and wane depending on changing political, economic, and social conditions. The current struggle in the Islamic world over church-state issues is similar to that which occurred in Europe from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. Greater political participation, higher standards of living, and increased access to education will gradually erode government concerns about religious unrest and allow for greater religious pluralism and freedom of worship. That is why we must be present, in place, with a reservoir of goodwill, prepared as President Spencer W. Kimball said, having a thorough understanding of the peoples, cultures, and languages of the region. We need to be in place when conditions improve, and I am optimistic they will improve gradually over time

throughout the Middle East. Opportunities to consolidate our presence will emerge, but we have to be ready to catch the wave whenever and wherever it comes by.

James A. Toronto is an associate professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Brigham Young University. This essay was presented at "The Challenge of Sharing Religious Beliefs in a Global Setting," the International Society's tenth annual conference, August 1999, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.