

# The importance of the middle east in christian mission

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## I. Introduction

Islam has become the biggest stronghold which Christianity must overcome to preach the gospel to all nations. Every year, Open Doors which serves persecuted Christians in the world announces *Open Doors World Watch List*, a list ranking and classifying countries with Christian persecution into five categories according to the severity; severe persecution, oppression, severe limitations, some limitations, and some problems. This list shows how Islam causes difficulties toward Christians and their activities. According to the Table 1, there is only one country under severe persecution, North Korea, but there are six countries under the category of oppression and all of them are Islamic countries. Thirteen out of nineteen countries under severe limitations are Islamic countries, and nineteen out of twenty-two countries under the category of some limitations are Islamic countries. In summary, thirty-nine countries in the list of fifty most persecuting countries in the world are Islamic countries. Johnstone also supports this trend by stating that forty-two countries out of sixty-six countries which have significant restrictions on religious belief are Islamic countries.<sup>2</sup>

Islam is not only the strongest hindrance to Christian mission,

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<sup>2</sup> Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, *Operation World*, 21st Century ed. (Cumbria, UK: Paternoster Lifestyle, 2001), p. 2.

but also the biggest threat to Christianity because it is the most rapidly growing religion in the world. According to Johnstone, the growth rate of Muslim population was 2.17% while that of Christian was 1.43% between 1995 and 2000.<sup>3</sup> After making careful evaluation of the religious trends and likely developments over the period 1900 to 2050, he predicted that the growth rate of Muslim population will be more than twice (over twelve-fold) of the growth rate of the world population (nearly six-fold) and increased in population from 0.2 billion to 2.5 billion.”

<Table I> Open Doors World Watch List 2009

Category	Countries	Category	Countries	
Severe Persecution	1 North Korea		26 <i>Nigeria (North)</i>	
	2 <i>Saudi Arabia</i>		27 <i>Azerbaijan</i>	
	3 <i>Iran</i>		28 <i>Oman</i>	
	Oppression		4 <i>Afghanistan</i>	29 <i>Brunei</i>
			5 <i>Somalia</i>	30 <i>Sudan (North)</i>
			6 <i>Maldives</i>	31 <i>Zanzibar Isl.</i>
			7 <i>Yemen</i>	32 <i>Kuwait</i>
Severe Limitations	8 <i>Laos</i>	Some Limitations	33 <i>Cuba</i>	
	9 <i>Eritrea</i>		34 <i>Tajikistan</i>	
	10 <i>Uzbekistan</i>		35 <i>United Arab Emirates</i>	
	11 <i>Bhutan</i>		36 <i>Sri Lanka</i>	
	12 <i>China</i>		37 <i>Jordan</i>	
	13 <i>Pakistan</i>		38 <i>Djibouti</i>	
	14 <i>Turkmenistan</i>		39 <i>Turkey</i>	
	15 <i>Comoros</i>		40 <i>Morocco</i>	
	16 <i>Iraq</i>		41 <i>Indonesia</i>	
	17 <i>Qatar</i>		42 <i>Palestinian Territories</i>	
	18 <i>Mauritania</i>		43 <i>Bangladesh</i>	
	19 <i>Algeria</i>		44 <i>Belarus</i>	
	20 <i>Chechnya</i>		45 <i>Ethiopia</i>	
	21 <i>Egypt</i>		46 <i>Syria</i>	
22 <i>India</i>	47 <i>Tunisia</i>			
23 <i>Vietnam</i>	48 <i>Bahrain</i>			
24 <i>Burma</i>	Some Problem	49 <i>Kenya (Northeast)</i>		
25 <i>Libya</i>		50 <i>Kazakhstan</i>		

Source: Open Doors. *Open Doors World Watch List 2009* (accessed 18 May 2009); available from [http://www.opendoorsusa.org/UserFiles/File/WorldWatchList\[1\].pdf](http://www.opendoorsusa.org/UserFiles/File/WorldWatchList[1].pdf)

Around 20% of total population in the world is Muslims, and there are fifty countries where Islam is the predominant religion among two-hundred and thirty-seven countries in the world.<sup>4</sup> There are seven countries-Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, UAE, Yemen and Oman-in the Middle East.<sup>5</sup> All of these countries are listed in Table 1. Although the Muslim population in the seven countries is less than 4% of the total Muslim population, the Middle East plays an important role in the Islamic world. This paper explains why the Middle East is important in the Islamic world and in Christian mission.

## II. The Importance of the Middle East

In this section, the importance of the Middle East in Islamic world will be studied from historical, geographical, economical, theological and political perspectives.

### 1. Historical Perspective

Historically, the Middle East is the birthplace of the Islamic faith. In the pre-Islamic period, the Middle East was politically and religiously within the tight orbit of two great empires, Byzantine, or the Eastern Roman empire from northwest, and Sasanian, or Persian empire from northeast. However, the war between these two empires in 602 caused by the murder of Maurice, the Byzantine Emperor and an ally of Khusraw II Aparwez of Sasanian empire led the exhaustion of two empires and created a political and military vacuum.<sup>6</sup> In terms of religion, especially of Christianity, there was doctrinal confusion. There were debates on

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3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 The Middle East can mean various regions including different countries according to its user: The Middle East in this paper means the Arabian Gulf including seven countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, UAE, Yemen and Oman.

6 Daniel W. Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004), pp. 30-32.

theology, especially on Christology about the nature of Jesus Christ. Although the Byzantine empire considered itself to be the protector of orthodox Christianity, many considered heresies were widely distributed in the empire including three large ones such as Jacobite Monophysites, Coptic Monophysites, and Nestorians, and countless small ones such as Donatists, Montanists, Marcionites, Melitians, Quatrodecimans, and Luciferians.<sup>7</sup>

While the political influence from the outside of the Middle East was weakened and Christianity experienced doctrinal confusion, the Middle East was ready to launch a new religion and civilization in the seventh century. Brown mentions three features of Mecca in those days, the major city in the Middle East; an important religious shrine, the Ka'bah; an annual pilgrimage connected with the shrine; and a tribal ruling elite, the Quraysh who controlled over the shrine and pilgrimage to political and economic advantage.<sup>8</sup> On top of these features, the Middle East had some fine poetry that had influence on the formation of the Qur'an, interesting religious rituals, and the growing influence of monotheism in the form of Jewish and Christian communities.<sup>9</sup> There were the Jews and Christians in the Middle East at that time, but for the most part, the Arabs in the region stubbornly practiced polytheism that involved praying to saints; making pilgrimages to tombs and special mosques; venerating trees, caves, and stones; and using votive and sacrificial offerings.<sup>10</sup> There were, however, Arab monotheists called Hanifs and Christians and Jews in Arabia as well. All these features rendered the Middle East suitable as the birthplace of a new religion, Islam.

Muhammad was born in the Middle East about six centuries after Jesus the Messiah at a time when Christians were debating theology. Muhammad from the Quraysh believed himself visited by the angel Gabriel in the month of Ramadan of his fortieth year, and received the first verses of Sura 96 of the Qur'an at Mount Hira outside of Mecca. Muhammad was terrified by the revelation, but his wife

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7 Ibid., pp. 21-23.

8 Ibid., p. 16.

9 Ibid., p. 17.

10 "Saudi Arabia: Wahhabi Theology in Islam," [http://atheism.about.com/library/FAQs/islam/countries/bl\\_SaudiIslamWahhabi.htm](http://atheism.about.com/library/FAQs/islam/countries/bl_SaudiIslamWahhabi.htm) (accessed September 6, 2008).

Khadijah and her Christian cousin Waraqa immediately reassured him, and she became the first follower. For three years Muhammad's message spread quietly and privately, and a group of followers, Muslims, formed around him who are all prominent in early Islamic history, and religious rituals such as the ritual ablution and the salat were established.<sup>11</sup>

When Muhammad went to his family, close relatives and acquaintances with his message and mocked their gods, he met serious opposition and even the leaders of the Quraysh began to plot his destruction which led Muhammad and his followers' relocation to Medina, another major city in the Middle East, in 622 which is known as the Hijra. Islam was fortified through such victories against the Meccans as at Badr, and Muhammad entered Mecca in 630 as victor. All Islamic events which were important to the formation of Islam were taken place in the Middle East including Mecca, Medina, Mount Hira, Badr, and Uhud. Therefore, the Middle East is the cradle of Islam.

## **2. Geographical Perspective**

Geographically, the Middle East is located at the center of Islamic world. Since the beginning of Islam, the Middle East has been the heartland of Islamic world. After Muhammad conquered Mecca in 630, Islam expanded its territory rapidly. By the early 640s, all of Iraq was under Muslim control and Persian imperial power was destroyed. Within another twenty years, by 661, the Muslim conquerors ruled from the borders of Central Asia to North Africa and from Yemen to Northern Syria. By 750, the political reach of the Islamic empire stretched from Spain to India and from Sub-Saharan Africa to Central Asia. The Middle East lied at the center of this vast Islamic empire.

The Middle East has to be the center geographically regardless of age because Muhammad was born in the region, and the two holy cities of Islam, Mecca and Media, are located in the Middle East. The Saudi king is referred to as the custodian of Mecca and Medina. Muslims from around the world make the pilgrimage

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11 Brown, pp. 73-74.

to the Ka'bah in Mecca every year at the Hajj,<sup>12</sup> one of the Islamic duties. The number of Hajj pilgrims had increased by 100% for every decade from 1940s until 1970s.<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Hajj, the official website for the Hajj operated by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, also provides statistics on the Hajj and the number of Hajj pilgrims has grown from 1,839,154 in 2000 to 2,130,594 in 2006.<sup>14</sup> It is noticeable that the number of non-Saudi pilgrims is increasing rapidly while the number of Saudi pilgrims is stable. The Saudi government is furnishing the pilgrims with more accommodation and facilities.

Medina is the city in the Middle East where the Muslim *ummah* was first established when Muslim emigrants from Mecca (Muhajirun) came to the city and lived together with the local Muslims (Ansar).<sup>15</sup> Muhammad constructed the first mosque in Medina and the manner of worship that developed in that mosque has become the model for all Muslim congregations around the world for all time. Muhammad also laid the foundations for a Muslim political order and developed the constitution of Medina which established the Muslim principles of brotherhood, justice, and consensus (Shenk 2003, 152).<sup>16</sup> Medina where Islamic faith, rituals, and the way of Muslim life were developed is in the Middle East. Therefore, the Middle East is the geographical center of Islamic world gathering more than three million Muslim pilgrims around the globe every year to Mecca and the adjunct pilgrimage locations.<sup>17</sup>

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12 Hajj is the once in a lifetime obligation, contingent upon physical and financial ability, to perform the ritual pilgrimage in Mecca. The jurists are particularly preoccupied with outlining the complex requirements for the valid completion of each stage of the pilgrimage (Brown 2004, 103).

13 "Why Are Muslims Turning to Mecca?," <http://members.ozemail.com.au/~zaynabelfatah/WhyPeopleTurningMecca.htm> (accessed July 27, 2008).

14 Ministry of Hajj, "Hajj and Umrah Statistics," <http://www.hajjinformation.com/main/1.htm> (accessed July 27, 2008).

15 David W. Shenk, *Journeys of the Muslim Nation and the Christian Church: Exploring the Mission of Two Communities* (Waterloo, Ont.; Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 2003), p. 143, 150.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 152.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 177.

### 3. Economical Perspective

Economically, the Middle East is the major source for the fund of Islamic mission in the world. In the years immediately after World War II, the states in the Middle East were marginal to the global economy. However, within three decades these states in the Middle East had achieved the highest per capita incomes in the world and become significant participant to the global economy.<sup>18</sup> For example, Kuwait, one of the states, experienced a painful economic decline during the 1920s and 1930s because of the stagnated pearling industry<sup>19</sup> and became one of the most impoverished countries in the world. However, Kuwait began oil exports in 1946 earning \$760,000 in that year. Oil revenues went up \$169 million in 1953, and after the oil embargo and price increases,<sup>20</sup> they rose dramatically to \$21.7 billion in 1980. Saudi Arabia earned \$6.4 billion in oil revenues in the year before the embargo, but it increased the revenues to \$27.7 billion in the fiscal year 1974-1975, and during 1981, boosted to \$102 billion (Cleveland 1994, 383).<sup>21</sup> There are 1,032,132 million barrels of oil reserves in the world and about a half of it is in the Middle East (Saudi Arabia: 261,750, United Arab Emirates: 97,800, Kuwait: 96,500, Qatar: 15,207, and Oman: 5,506).<sup>22</sup> The countries in the Middle East became prosperous with their petrodollars.

The six traditional member countries in the Middle East, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, led by Saudi Arabia established the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981 to cooperate on matters of mutual security and economic and educational ventures. Saudi Arabia has poured

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18 William L. Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), p. 377.

19 Kuwaiti economy was based on pearling and commerce. Kuwait City was the best harbor on the Gulf, and the merchants of the region developed it as a center for trade between India and parts of the Middle East. These activities brought wealth to the Kuwait. *Ibid.*, p. 289.

20 The oil price was dramatically increased from \$2.74 to \$11.65 in 1974 and to \$34 in 1980 per barrel.

21 Cleveland, p. 383.

22 "Oil Reserves, Production and Consumption in 2001," <http://www.scaruffi.com/politics/oil.html> (accessed July 28, 2008).

large sums of its oil wealth into the *al-Islah* organizations<sup>23</sup> active in Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates. It has successfully done this through mosque building, aid programs and in the West the provision of scholarships for Islamic studies, and through political agendas and finance markets.<sup>24</sup> As one of the results, they have built more mosques in their countries, which are the center of Islamic faith. The number of mosques has tripled in 1980's, to nearly 4,000 in the states other than Saudi Arabia. Beyond this, Saudi Arabia had at least 20,000 mosques and announced plans to construct more than 2,000 more.<sup>25</sup> Most of the mosque construction is being planned and financed by the governments. The boom in mosque construction is clear evidence of the trend of priorities to promote and strengthen their religion, Islam.

Not only does Saudi Arabia have spent the petrodollars to the kingdom and the Middle East, but also to other countries to expand Islam. *Ain-Al-Yaqeen*, the Saudi government English weekly magazine, reported that the Saudi royal family spent billions of their oil wealth to spread Islam to every corner of the earth in an article on March 1, 2002.<sup>26</sup> The following is an excerpt taken from the article:

The cost of King Fahd's efforts in this field has been astronomical, amounting to many billions of Saudi Riyals. In terms of Islamic institutions, the result is some 210 Islamic Centers wholly or partly financed by Saudi Arabia, more than 1,500 Mosques and 202 colleges and almost 2,000 schools for educating Muslim children in non-Islamic countries in Europe, North and South America, Australia and Asia. Among the biggest is King Fahd

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23 The principal al-Islah societies are located in Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, and they cooperate, at least temporarily, with the governments in power from whom they accept financial assistance. James A. Bill, "Resurgent Islam in the Persian Gulf," *Foreign Affairs* 63, (1984): p. 110.

24 Patrick Johnstone, "Look at the Fields: Survey of the Task," in *From Seed to Fruit: Global Trends, Fruitful Practices, and Emerging Issues among Muslims*, ed. J. Dudley Woodberry, Global Trends: Soils, Seed, Sowers and First Fruits (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2008), pp. 13-14.

25 Bill: p. 116.

26 Ain-Al-Yaqeen, "Huge Saudi Efforts in the Field of Establishing Islamic Centers, Mosques and Academies All over the World. Tunisian, Arab and Muslim Newspapers Lauds the Kingdom's Services to the Pilgrims," <http://www.ain-al-yaqeen.com/issues/20020301/feat3en.htm> (accessed July 31, 2008).



Islamic Center in Malaga, Spain, on an area of 3,848 sq. m., whose foundation stone was laid in 1998. The university-like Center embraces academic, educational, cultural, and propagatory activities.

The article articulated the details where and how much the Royal family supported to build mosques and Islamic centers around the world. Sperry also wrote a similar report on the mosques in the United States of America; "Some of the largest mosques and Islamic centers in America are funded by the royal government of Saudi Arabia, which gets most of its revenues from oil exports."<sup>27</sup> Conroy reported on Latin American case, "Presently, all countries in Latin America have a high concentration of Muslims...Gross funding from Saudi Arabia has allowed them to build a large, traditionally aesthetic mosque, as well as a community centre."<sup>28</sup>

The Saudi petrodollars have gone to the many universities in Western countries as the provision of scholarships for Islamic studies. The same article of *Ain-Al-Yaqeen* clearly states the objective of this donation as the following:<sup>29</sup>

In setting up these prestigious chairs, the Kingdom has pursued a number of objectives. They are further evidence of King Fahd's determination to encourage and enhance communications between Islamic culture and other cultures; to encourage understanding of the true nature of Islam by explaining clearly Muslim beliefs and by correcting common misconceptions and misrepresentations; and to show that Islam embraces knowledge with enthusiasm.

The article names the University of California at Santa Barbara, Harvard University, University of London, the Gulf University, and the University of Moscow.

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27 Paul Sperry, "Black-Gold Blues: U.S.-Saudi Oil Imports Fund American Mosques," [http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE\\_ID=27327](http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=27327) (accessed July 31, 2008).

28 Jan Conroy, "Count Saudi Mosques in Latin America, Too!," <http://www.danielpipes.org/comments/6395> (accessed July 31, 2008).

29 *Ain-Al-Yaqeen*.

In addition, the Saudi government have funded to establish Islamic academies in some of the major capitals of the world to educate Muslim children, supported institutes to promote Arab and Islamic studies and to carry on the researches on Islam.<sup>30</sup>

Saudi Arabia is distributing the Qu'ran in the world published from the largest printing complex in the world in Medina. The complex was opened in 1984 by King Fahd to print and distribute the Qu'ran to as wide an audience as possible. It has produced more than 60 editions of the Qu'ran and books on the prophetic tradition and biographies of Muhammad in different languages. It also produces recordings of the Qu'ran in video and audio form and a Braille version of the Qu'ran for the blind Muslims. By the year 2000, the Complex had printed 138 million copies of the Qu'ran which had been widely distributed inside the Kingdom and abroad.<sup>31</sup>

One of Saudi Arabia's most influential journalists, Dawood al-Shirian, who is a former regional director at Al Hayat, reported that Saudi funded an estimated 90% of the expenses of the entire faith, throughout the Muslim world.<sup>32</sup> The goal of such contribution is to strengthen the voice of Islam and Arab culture according to *Ain-Al-Yaqeen*.<sup>33</sup>

#### 4. Theological Perspective

Theologically, the Middle East is the source of austere Islamism. As we discussed in the above, Saudi Arabia expanded its Wahhabi Islam to not only political systems but also to the areas of education and research. The graduates of the educational system strengthening Islamic education in the early 1960s demanded a *Shari'ah* college and more religious faculties in the universities, and the gradu-

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30 Ibid.

31 Ain-Al-Yaqeen, "The Jewel in the Crown of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques," <http://www.ain-al-yaqeen.com/issues/20020301/feat3en.htm> (accessed July 31, 2008).

32 Dawood al-Shirian, "What Is Saudi Arabia Going to Do?," *Al-Hayat*, May 19, 2003.

33 Ain-Al-Yaqeen, "Huge Saudi Efforts in the Field of Establishing Islamic Centers, Mosques and Academies All over the World. Tunisian, Arab and Muslim Newspapers Lauds the Kingdom's Services to the Pilgrims."

ates from these educational institutions clamored for more religious education. Such demands culminated in the establishment of the vast Imam Mohammad bin Saud University.<sup>34</sup>

The university, founded in 1953 and accorded university status in 1974, had more than 1,300 teachers and 23,000 students in 2000/2001 academic year. Currently the university has several faculties. The High Judiciary Institute was originally established in 1965 for the purpose of graduating qualified *Shari'ah* judges. The Faculty of *Shari'ah* (theology) was established earlier in 1953 for the purpose of meeting the demand for qualified *Ulema* and preachers throughout the country.<sup>35</sup> Thus, this university is a seminary for the training of clerics in the Wahhabi Islam. This university is also known as the "terrorist factory," because three of the 9/11 suicide hijackers<sup>36</sup> are from this university.

The theology taught in this university can be deduced from the Wahhabi Qur'an,<sup>37</sup> which distorts and adds to the original to change its sense in a radical direction in the English version.<sup>38</sup> For example, the following is the four final lines of Fatiha in a normal rendition of the Arabic original:

Guide us to the straight path,  
The path of those whom You have favored,  
Not of those who have incurred Your wrath,  
Nor of those who have gone astray

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34 Michael Field, *Inside the Arab World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 337-38.

35 Samirad, "Imam Muhammad Bin Saud University," <http://www.saudinf.com/main/j44.htm> (accessed September 7, 2008).

36 They are Abd al-Aziz Abd al-Rahman Al-Omari who was on the first plane to crash into the World Trade Center; Ahmed Abdullah Al-Nami who was on the plane that crashed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, and Mohned Mohamed al-Shehri who was on the plane that struck the South Tower.

37 The Wahhabi Qur'an is an edition of the Islamic scripture, with commentary, printed in every major European, Asian, and African languages in paperback editions that are distributed free or at low cost throughout the world.

38 Stephen Schwartz, "Saudi Wah-Habi Terrorist Factory," <http://lists.ibiblio.org/pipermail/homestead/2004-September/000803.html> (accessed September 6, 2008).

In the Wahhabi Qur'an, the same is translated as the following:

Guide us to the Straight Way.

The Way of those on whom You have bestowed Your Grace,  
not (the way) of those who have earned Your Anger (such as the Jews),  
nor of those who went astray (such as the Christians).

Similar distortions condemning the Jews and Christians can be found in 17:1; 2:62; 3:113; 5:65.

Such a biased Islamic theology is reflected in their educational system. *Freedom House* analyzed a set of twelve current Saudi Ministry of Education religion textbooks, used in the academic year of 2006 in Saudi Arabia, and reported summaries what is being taught today in Saudi public school textbooks about how Muslims should relate to other religious communities.<sup>39</sup> One of them is, "Command Muslims to "hate" Christians, Jews, "polytheists" and other "unbelievers," including non-Wahhabi Muslims, though, incongruously, not to treat them "unjustly".<sup>40</sup> Therefore, the Middle East is one of the sources of the most hard line Islamic theology in the world in which terrorism breeds.

## 5. Political Perspective

Politically, the Middle East is influential to other Muslim nations to rule the

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<sup>39</sup>The study was pursued after senior Saudi government spokesmen claimed that they had thoroughly revised their educational materials. In 2005, Saudi embassy spokesman Adel al-Jubeir stated: "We have reviewed our educational curriculums. We have removed materials that are inciteful or intolerant towards people of other faiths." The Saudi ambassador to the United States in 2006, Prince Turki al-Faisal, while on a nation-wide speaking tour earlier 2006, asserted: "We eliminated what might be perceived as intolerance from old textbooks that were in our system." On May 18, 2006, the Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Saud Al-Faisal stated, "the whole system of education is being transformed from top to bottom. Textbooks are only one of the steps that have been taken by Saudi Arabia."

<sup>40</sup> Laura Ingalls, "Revised Saudi Government Textbooks Still Demonize Christians, Jews, Non-Wahhabi Muslims and Other," *Freedom House*, May 23, 2006.

countries based on Islam. Saudi Arabia, the largest country in the region, has led the influence. In 1744, Muhammad bin-Saud, a minor prince of Najd and the ruler of Al-Dar'iyah near the modern Saudi capital of Riyadh, decided to adopt the Islamic revival proclaimed by Muhammad bin-Abd-ul-Wahhab known as Wahhabi Islam,<sup>41</sup> and converted the Najdis to Wahhabi Islam.<sup>42</sup> The two, bin-Saud and Abd-ul-Wahhab, conquered the rest of Arabia. Since then, Wahhabi Islam has been not only spiritual but also political core of Saudi Arabia.

King Abd-ul-Aziz Al-Saud (1902-1953) who also adopted Wahhabi Islam unified all of Arabia. He recaptured Riyadh in 1902 where the Ottoman forces were destroyed in 1819, and seized control of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina from the Ottoman authorities in 1925. He had ruled the kingdom based on the Wahhabism without any constitution, codes of governmental procedure, political parties, or institutionalized forms of consultation until his death in 1953 except the Qur'an and the *shari'ah* (Cleveland 1994, 383). When King Faysal transformed the kingdom's administration and other systems, the Wahhabism was the foundation and he stated, "Saudi Arabia has no need for a constitution because it has the Qur'an, which is the oldest and most efficient constitution in the world."<sup>43</sup> Saudi Arabia projected itself as the protector of Islam committing to enforcing the Qur'an and the *shari'ah*.

Saudi Arabia extended its influence to its immediate states in the Gulf, and the states of GCC maintain the same political system, monarchism, until these days. Saudi influence went beyond the Gulf to the more distant region including South Asia, the rest of the Arab world, and Muslim Africa. During the 1962 Hajj ceremonies, Saudi had initiative to establish the Muslim World League to defeat any threat that the enemies of Islam tried to use to draw Muslims away from Islam and destroy their unity and brotherhood, and its initiative culminated in the estab-

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41 The Bedouins of Najd performed superstitious practices and paganism such as the cult of trees and stone worship. In response to this, Abd-al-Wahhab preached to return to the true teachings of Islam, based on the Qur'an and the Sunna, as interpreted by the strict Hanbali school.

42 Shireen Hunter, *The Future of Islam and the West: Clash of Civilizations or Peaceful Coexistence?* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998), pp. 153-54.

43 Cleveland, p. 386.

lishment of the Organization of the Islamic Conference in 1972.<sup>44</sup> *Ain-Al-Aqeen* reported the following:

Throughout King Fahd's reign, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia played a crucial role in all these organizations, using its influence to nurture and encourage unity in the Islamic world amongst which the Organization of the Islamic Conference and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth. In addition the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has played a role in nurturing Islamic unity through the Muslim World League, based in the Holy City of Makkah Al Mukkaramah.<sup>45</sup>

Saudi's role as the center of the Islamic world was even accelerated after the oil embargo in 1973 using its oil revenue, and Saudi Arabia made a crucial effort to take the spiritual and political leadership of the Islamic world. Hunter wrote, "The kingdom embarked on a large foreign aid program through a variety of bilateral, pan-Arab, and pan-Islamic channels, which resulted in, for example, the establishment of the Islamic Development Fund with its headquarters in Jiddah."<sup>46</sup> We already discussed how and to what areas Saudi spend its petrodollars to spread Wahhabi Islam in the above.

Saudi Arabia's political system based on Wahhabi Islam affected especially Pakistan and Afghanistan. In 1976, General Zia ul-Haq, who had trained the Saudi militaries, terminated Bhutto's regime through a military coup and ruled Pakistan. He launched a series of policies to Islamize Pakistan extensively according to strict Sunni lines, and Saudi-Pakistani ties became closer (Hunter 1998, 159).

In Afghanistan, Daoud, a cousin of Muhammad Zahir Shar who was ruling the country, carried out a coup and took the regime from his uncle in 1972. He

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44 Hunter, p. 157. Hunter explains that the MWL is one of the Saudi efforts of using Islamism to restrain both Arab radicalism and Communism which played as external threats to Saudi monarchism in those days.

45 Ain-Al-Yaqeen, "The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Fahd Ibn Abdul Aziz Directs the Distribution of Hundreds of Thousands Quran to the Pilgrims," <http://www.ain-al-yaqeen.com/issues/20020301/feat3en.htm> (accessed July 31, 2008).

46 Hunter, p. 158.

used Saudi Wahhabi Islam in ruling the country to distance from the Soviet Union. The war against the Soviet Union in 1980s provided an additional opportunity for Saudi Arabia to cooperate with Afghanistan. Some Saudis went to Afghanistan and joined *mujahiddin* known as Saudi 'Afghans' to fight against the Soviet Union (Field 1995, 338). The Islam-oriented educational system has the root of this phenomenon because the students under the educational system received the strengthened education on Wahhabi Islam but not the skills needed for today's technological industry. They are unemployed young men, religiously educated and well motivated, some of whom have military training, and they are targeted by terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda.<sup>47</sup>

When Islamic revolution took place in Iran in 1979, Saudi contained Iran's militant Islam and increased its effort such as financial assistance, training, and indoctrination to strengthen Wahhabi Islam in the Arab world. It funded to establish the Afghanistan training camps in Pakistan. Such aids provided Islam for an opportunity to become more extreme. In Algeria, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) received considerable financial support from Saudi, and became a potent political force in the late 1980s. The FIS led finally to a military takeover in 1992.<sup>48</sup> Syria and the PLO also received large amount of financial support from Saudi Arabia.<sup>49</sup> Kuwait followed the same policy and gave extensive financial assistance to the PLO and the Arab states bordering Israel.

It is well known that Saudi Arabians aided the Taliban since late 1996. Saudi assistance to the Taliban has at times extended beyond the strictly financial to encompass military and organizational assistance. The Saudi expatriate Osama bin Laden of Al-Qaeda has sheltered in the territory of Taliban. He declared war against the "infidel" West in 1998, and it was suspected that the August 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya as well as 9/11 were done by a group of persons who were his followers. Although official Saudi aid report-

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47 Voice of America, "Saudi Arabia: Origins of Terror," <http://www.voanews.com/Korean/archive/2004-12/a-2004-12-07-13-1.cfm> (accessed September 6, 2008).

48 Hunter, p. 161.

49 The major reason is to mute their criticism of the royal regime and its ties to the United States. Cleveland, p. 384.

edly stopped in 1998, Saudi money and support has continued to find its way to the Taliban in the form of private contributions.<sup>50</sup>

According to Alex Alexiev, vice president for research at the *Center for Security Policy*, there are between 240 and 265 Islamic charities active in Saudi Arabia and outside of it.<sup>51</sup> The largest and most active in terrorism funding is the Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation (AHIF). Alexiev describes AHIF as the following:

The Al -Haramain Islamic Foundation (AHIF) is one of the three largest Saudi front organizations active in the support of terrorism going back many years, and has been involved in the funding of Al Qaeda, the bombing of the American embassies in Africa and all manner of jihadist activities in Pakistan, the Balkans, Chechnya, Kashmir and elsewhere. But it will be a mistake to think of it simply as a terrorism enabler. It is even more important as a key player in funding and promoting the hateful Wahhabi/Salafi creed and the seditious shari'ah doctrine worldwide including in the United States.<sup>52</sup>

### III. Conclusion

Islam is both the strongest hindrance to Christian mission and the biggest threat to Christianity, and the Middle East led by Saudi Arabia is the core in Islamic world. Historically, it is the birthplace of Islam. Geographically, it has the two major Islamic shrines and Muhammad was born in the Middle East. Economically, it is a financial source to propagate Islam to the world utilizing its enormous oil revenue. Theologically, it is an incubator for a fundamental Islamic theology-the

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50 Human Rights Watch, "Afghanistan: Crisis of Impunity," Human Rights Watch <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/afghan2/Afghan0701-02.htm#TopOfPage> (accessed September 6, 2008).

51 Jamie Glazov, "Saudi "Charities" and the War against America," <http://www.frontpagemag.com/Articles/Read.aspx?GUID=B164102B-EAB6-4407-9263-D2C34C43D838> (accessed September 15, 2008).

52 Ibid.(accessed September 15, 2008).The other two organizations are the Muslim World League and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth.



Wahhabi Islam. Politically, it is an advocator of a political system embracing the Wahhabi Islam.

In summary, the Middle East plays a crucial role in the Islamic world. The Middle East lies on the way to fulfill the Great Commission. We must jump the obstacle and several steps are suggested to do so. As the first step, we must acknowledge the significance of the Middle East in Islam and in Christian mission. We need to know what influence the Middle East gives to the world, especially to the Christian world and its mission. The second is to understand their tactics of spreading Islam to the world and of hindering Christian activities toward them. When we understand what they are doing we can develop necessary strategies to overcome the hindrance and to cope with its threat which is the third step.

## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the reasons why the Middle East located in the Arabian Gulf must be considered significantly both in the Islamic world and in Christian mission. This paper explores the reasons from historical, geographical, economical, theological and political perspectives of the Middle East. Historically, it is the birthplace of Islam. Geographically, it has the two major Islamic shrines and Muhammad was born in the Middle East. Economically, it is a financial source to propagate Islam to the world utilizing its enormous oil revenue. Theologically, it is an incubator for a fundamental Islamic theology?the Wahhabi Islam. Politically, it is an advocator of a political system embracing the Wahhabi Islam. Therefore, the Middle East is the core in Islamic world.

Islam has become the biggest stronghold by persecuting Christians and preventing them from Christian activities. Christianity must overcome this stronghold to preach the gospel to all nations. Islam is the biggest threat to Christianity because it is the most rapidly growing religion in the world. Therefore, Islam is important to Christian mission. Because the Middle East plays a crucial role in the Islamic world, it should be considered significantly in Christian mission.

As conclusions, this paper suggests three steps to face the reality of hindrance and threat caused by Islam. The first step is that we must acknowledge the significance of the Middle East in Islam and in Christian mission. We need to know what influence the Middle East gives to the world, especially to the Christian world and its mission. The second step is to understand their tactics of spreading Islam to the world and of hindering Christian activities toward them. When we understand what they are doing we can develop necessary strategies to overcome the hindrance and to cope with its threat as the third step.

**Key words:** Islam, the Middle East, economy, theology, politics

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