



**The Middle East:  
Where the Past is always present  
And the future is not far behind**

**By Kameel Majdali**



*The cradle of civilisation, the wellspring of faith, the powder keg of ardor, and the terminus of time--there is no other place on earth where so much has occurred for so long and affected so many. The Middle East is the ominous, swarthy, and mysterious hinge upon which, it seems, all of history turns. Alternately rocked by unending wars, soothed by undying devotion, tortured by unflinching fanaticism and calmed by unyielding patience, this small crescent of sand and stone is once again the stage upon which the passion play of mankind's trauma is set--where war is waged for the sake of peace, where hatred is stoked for the sake of righteousness and where tyranny is invoked for the sake of freedom.--George Grant*

Even before globalization became a great buzz word or Hollywood cranking out “The Sheikh” or “Lawrence of Arabia,” the Middle East has exuded a mystique and influence far beyond its natural resources. This centrally-located region of sand, sun, and sorrow continues to dominate world attention and promises to be the most significant and perilous of all foreign policies issues, including that nuclear-armed India and Pakistan.

The purpose of this essay is to find out why the Middle East is important to the world, important to the Christian, what is the present situation, and what are the future prospects.

## **The Importance of the Middle East to the World**

When you consider that less than two hundred years ago, the Middle East was a neglected region, a backwater of the Ottoman Turkish Empire, the place Europe sailed around via the Cape of Good Hope in order to reach India, its rise in prominence has been spectacular. For most of the twentieth century, it has had the glare of the international spot-light upon it. We should ask: “why?” Why is the Middle East important to the world?

The immediate secular answer to this question is usually “oil.” Indeed, the Middle East is contains 69% of the world’s known oil reserves, and all of it is in Muslim hands.

Central location is another reason for the Middle East’s importance, particularly Israel/Palestine, which serves as a land bridge between Eurasia and Africa. For millennia, trading caravans, religious pilgrims, and conquering armies have traveled on the international highway, and the Suez Canal has highlighted this strategic importance.

A third reason is history and heritage. This is a part of the world where recorded history is measured in millennia and not centuries. Australia and New Zealand’s involvement during the two world wars, particularly the Anzacs at Gallipolli and the Australian Lighthorsemen at Beersheba, have permanently etched the Middle East on our collective consciousness.

## **Importance of the Middle East to the Christian**

None of the above reasons even touched on what is probably the most important legacy of the Middle East: it is the birthplace of monotheism. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were birthed and exported from this part of the world. Furthermore, it is the conviction of this author that the bottom line of the current Israel/Palestinian/Arab conflict is not political or nationalistic but theological.

For the observant Christian of any denomination, the Middle East, and particularly Jerusalem, is of interest, if not importance. Here is why? It is the place of Christ's birth, ministry, and passion. He lived his entire life in the Middle East and except for brief visits to Lebanon, Egypt, and Jordan, was based in Israel/Palestine.

The Christian Church was born in the Middle East and for the first three hundred years had a strong eastern, if not Hebraic, flavor. The above-mentioned historical association applies to all things Christian and this link cannot be broken. While Christian administration in the Middle East lasted a few centuries, Christian pilgrimage has been constant from the beginning of the church even to this day. It may come as a surprise to western Christians but there are up to twenty million Christians that call the Middle East home, though it must be noted that in the last few decades these Christians are leaving the region at an alarming rate.

While history is a potent link, what really attracts attention are issues of the future. Classic Christian eschatology (the study or doctrine of "last things") is very similar to Jewish eschatology since they both have foundations in the Old Testament; the major difference is that Christians see the coming of the Jewish Messiah as synonymous to the second coming of Christ. The one thousand year reign of Christ, popularly called "The Millennium," has its headquarters in Jerusalem. While not all sectors of Christendom agree with this scenario, particularly "amillennialists" and "postmillennialists," no one can disagree that in the Eternal State (which occurs after the church age and/or Millennium) the home of all believers is the Heavenly or New Jerusalem (Revelation 21-22; Galatians 4:25-26; Hebrews 12:22).

## **The Present Day Scenario in the Middle East**

At the turn of the century, much of the Middle East was under Turkish rule, which was in great decline. Turkey lost the Middle East in World War I and the victorious allies allowed the newly-formed League of Nations to decide its fate. The League put Lebanon and Syria under French administration while Egypt, Iraq, (Trans) Jordan and Palestine were under the British. After World War II, if not before, most of these nations were granted full independence.

Palestine, however, was being contested by a Jewish minority of 680,000 people and an Arab majority of 1,200,000. Britain handed the problem of Palestine over to the United Nations in 1947, which recommended the partition of the country into separate Jewish and Arab states, with Jerusalem as an international, UN-supervised city. The State of Israel was declared on the 14 May 1948, the very day the British departed from Palestine, and the war that followed caused the new Jewish state to gain 73% of Mandatory

Palestine and most of Jerusalem, which it declared as its capital. At least 750,000 to 1,000,000 Palestinians were displaced, either to other parts of Palestine or the Arab world. Their state was not declared and the remainder of Palestine was in the hands of Egypt or Jordan. Fifty two years later and four more wars have still not resolved the issue of borders, Palestinian rights, or Jerusalem.

Today, we are involved in a Middle East peace process between Israel and its Arab neighbours, including Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinians. The thesis is: the more land Israel divests, the more “peace” it will receive. The sensitive issues of water, borders, a Palestinian state, and Jerusalem, have been left for last. Sovereignty over Jerusalem, particularly the Muslim-held *Haram esh Sharif* or Temple Mount, once site of Solomon and Herod’s Temple and now location of the Dome of the Rock and Al Aqsa Mosque, is probably the most difficult of all issues. Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert has suggested giving God sovereignty over the Temple Mount and this is being considered.

### **Future Prospects**

Difficult as the issues may be, it still is possible to come to a peace arrangement with all parties. Compromises will be mandatory and that is a difficult concession for hardliners. But will the peace be permanent, as Israel desires, or is it merely a truce, as some in the Arab camp have implied? Can the Arabs ever really permanently accept the existence of Israel in Palestine, a land that has been under Muslim control for over a thousand years. Even if every political and national difference can be resolved, what about the fundamentalist Muslim groups like Hamas, Hizbullah, and Islamic Jihad, which say they will never accept Israel’s existence under any circumstance (not to mention fundamentalist countries like Sudan, Libya, and Iran, which are not even part of the peace party)? Could we be seeing the golden age of the New World Order with peace and prosperity for Israel and the Arabs, or is it the prelude to the great military confrontation of Ezekiel 38-29; Zechariah 12-14; and Revelation 16. The position of the mature, dedicated global Christian should be simply “Watch and Pray.”