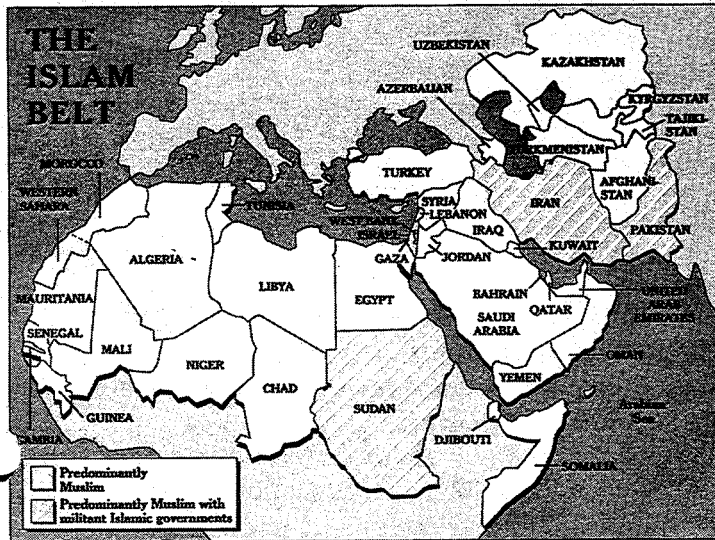


RELIGION & DEMOCRACY



August 1992

THE MIDDLE EAST



RNS PHOTO/New York Times

NCC Study Perpetuates Skewed Views of a Region in Turmoil

This year's official National Council of Churches mission study is on the Middle East. Two books included in the study are *From the Beginning: Resources and Study Guide to the Middle East*, by Betty Jane Bailey, and *Angle of Vision: Christians and the Middle East*, by Charles A. Kimball. What follows are some thoughts from Habib Malik, IRD's Middle East Associate, on the NCC study and the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), with which the NCC consults closely.

Bailey's resource listing includes Kenneth Cragg's *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East*, a book that Malik said he found appalling. Cragg's book, Malik said, illustrates a peculiar problem: negative stereotyping of Arab Christians, especially those who challenge the status quo and defend their freedoms to preserve their distinctive way of life in the face of repeated Islamic encroachments and assaults. According to Malik, Cragg, an Anglican Bishop from Oxford, is a self-styled specialist on Islam who has defended it at the expense of Christian Arabs. "For some reason, Christian Arabs are an acute embarrassment and inconvenience for Cragg. He utterly fails to treat the central theme of Arab history, namely, the deleterious effects of the Islamic *dhimmi* system and the humiliation it has bred among its victims. Instead, Cragg hitches the entire Christian Arab story to the Palestinian political agenda, and uses this as an occasion to vent his spleen against Israel." Further, Malik said, the book is replete with factual

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Myths, Misconceptions and Western Churches

By Habib C. Malik

In approaching the Middle East, its peoples, cultures, religious traditions, and myriad problems, the tendency of many in the West often has been to dwell on stereotypes and unwittingly to propagate misconceptions. Those guilty of this tendency have not been confined only to the ranks of scholars, regional experts, policy planners, or the secular media; the guilty also may be found among the clergy and officials within the oldline churches of the West.

What are some of these misconceptions, misplaced foci, and myths regarding the Middle East that warp the outlook of Western church officials and filter down to the rank and file?

The Arab-Israeli Conflict

First, there is an inordinate -- at times obsessive -- concentration on the Arab/Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Mention the Middle East to many in the West, including a great number of church officials, and

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A Survey of Christians in the Middle East

Many Christians in the region have roots going back to the founding of the church. -- Page 3

The Middle East Weapons Bazaar Continues

How this can be controlled in a way that leads to peace remains a subject of policy discussion. -- Page 6

Middle East Democracy?

A close look at political regimes in regions dominated by Islamic religion and culture -- the Middle East, North Africa, and the Gulf -- reveals a variegated picture. Countries differ on the degree of citizen participation in government, civic freedoms such as speech and assembly, and the role of organized parties. But two summary observations can be asserted with little qualification: full or even partially participatory democracy is rare, while strong elements -- dynasties, parties, the military or revolutionary cliques -- wield considerable power and limit openness in politics.

The dominance of Islam is one cause of these conditions. Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iran, and Morocco all are strongly influenced by restrictive interpretations of Islamic law that diminish human and civil rights, and deal brutally with lawbreakers. Iran, of course, stands out with its revolutionary clergy clique, which constrains the formal presidential-parliamentary system. On the whole, traditional, oligarchical power politics also shows as a strong force in these states apart from the influence of Islam. In some cases regimes are deliberately secular in spite of Islamic culture, seeking to restrain "Islamic fundamentalist" influence -- such as in Algeria and Egypt.

A few states qualify as parliamentary regimes, though the term "democracy" has to be stretched to make it apply even in these because of restrictions on political activities or limits to the effects of voting. Each of these, with the exception of Israel -- the most fully participatory state -- shows serious constraints (for example the power of the military in Turkey and Pakistan, and Lebanon's submission to Syria).

The predominant mode of governance is highly-controlled and centralized, either by absolute monarchy, military or dominant party. This is found in the largest and strongest states, which tend to compete with each other for regional influence.

Absolute dynastic monarchy (non-participatory):
Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman.

Monarchy (with some participatory governance):
Jordan, Morocco.

One-party, or military dominance:
Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria.

Presidential-parliamentary system:
Turkey, Iran.

Parliamentary democracy:
Israel, Lebanon.

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it triggers an automatic citation of the dispute over Palestine. The Middle East is reduced to nothing more nor less than this festering problem. Among politicians, the Arab-Israeli obsession breeds the related focus on the peace process. As serious as the Arab-Israeli conflict is, it is by no means the only important, long-term issue requiring Western and, specifically, Christian attention. And when I say this, I certainly do not have in mind the concern of the more materially minded in the West: oil. Regional issues with potentially wide repercussions include:

- poverty and the demographic explosion in certain parts of the Middle East;
- dwindling vital resources such as water;
- the growing rich Arab-poor Arab divide;
- the grand confrontation between Islam and modernity;
- the still-open question of the compatibility of Islam and democracy as it is understood in the West;
- the Islamic conception of human rights and religious pluralism, and the traditional mistreatment of native non-Muslim communities;
- the relentless ascendance of Islamic fundamentalists;
- the race by some in the Middle East for the hearts and minds of the Central Asian Muslim peoples of the former Soviet Union;
- the growing drug trade sponsored by Syria in Lebanon's Syrian-occupied Bekaa Valley; and
- the proliferation of nuclear and conventional weapons.

It is possible to list many others that relate only tangentially, if at all, to the Arab-Israeli impasse. Yet our churches, for the most part, expend most of their energies on this problem. In a given moment, the Palestinian problem and the related Arab-Israeli conflict may be of utmost importance. But many in the ecclesiastical hierarchy cannot see beyond it to other issues of enduring and occasionally crisis-level importance.

Islam Bashing

Secondly, it has become fashionable since the end of the Cold War and the Persian Gulf War to lament a perceived increase in "Islam-bashing." The chorus of lamenters goes beyond those with close connection to the oil industry, and beyond think-tank pundits and "Islam experts" connected to the intelligence and policy community. It includes a growing number of church officials. Their argument goes roughly like this: With the collapse of communism, some diehard cold warriors in the West are searching for a new spectre to attack. They have made of Islam the new bogey man, the undeserved recipient of their pent-up hostility.

Those who warn us against Islam-bashing then proceed to explain patronizingly that a more neighborly and less confrontational approach is desirable, since, after all, Islam today is where Christianity was some centuries back. It will

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Christian Communities Native to the Near East *

Some 12 million native Christians live in the Near and Middle East comprising several of the oldest Christian communities in the world. These Christians and their churches have endured a turbulent history of internal dissension and external persecution, yet they have survived battered but proud, and each community continues to witness to Christ in its own traditional manner.

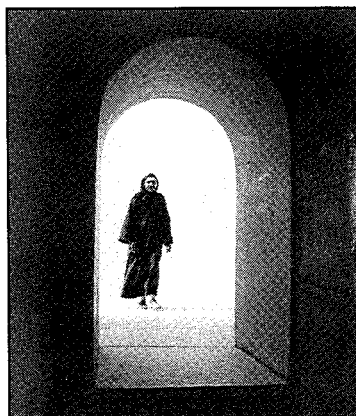
- Eastern (Chalcedonian) Orthodox Churches: There are four Eastern Orthodox patriarchates: Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch (now centered in Damascus), and Constantinople (now Istanbul). There is also a Church of

Cyprus. These churches are the inheritors of the Byzantine tradition of Eastern Christianity, a tradition rich in liturgy, mystical theology, and iconography. Hence their designation as "Greek Orthodox" churches in reference to their Byzantine roots. They recognize the doctrinal authority of the seven ecumenical church councils that were held between the years 325 and 787, including the crucial council at Chalcedon in 451 which pronounced the orthodox christological understanding that two natures, divine and human, were united in the person of Christ. Once thriving centers of Eastern Christianity, these four Patriarchates have been reduced over the centuries by, among other factors, the spread of Islam, to mere shadows of their former splendor.

- The Assyrian (Nestorian) Church: It is said that the origins of this church go back to Thomas the Apostle, who preached India. Known also as the Church of the East, the Assyrian Church took root in parts of Iraq and present-day Iran. The church broke away from its Orthodox sister to the

west in the fifth century following the council of Ephesus in 431 when Nestorius' christological position regarding Christ's two natures was condemned. Liturgical services of this church are conducted in the eastern dialect of classical Syriac, a version of Aramaic.

- Oriental (Non-Chalcedonian) Orthodox churches: They are four: Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian, and



A Coptic monk enters the ancient confines of El Sereign Monastery near Cairo. RNS Photo.

Syrian (Jacobite). Once again their break from the Eastern Orthodox mainstream came at Chalcedon in the fifth century over the question of the two natures of Christ. Hence their designation at times as Monophysites, namely those who believe there is one divine nature in Christ that is clad in human flesh. For centuries the non-Chalcedonian churches lived more or less in isolation from the rest of Christendom and, for political and linguistic reasons, even from one another. This in turn created a rich liturgical diversity within a single religious tradition.

- The Eastern Rite Catholic Churches: The combination of theological controversies inherited from the early centuries and vigorous missionary activities (associated with the Crusades) since the thirteenth century by Rome throughout the East led over the past 400 years to a separation of many people from the ancient churches described above to unity with Rome. These became

known as Eastern Rite Catholic churches or Uniates because while offering allegiance to Rome they retained the rites and liturgies of the East. There are five Uniate patriarchates in the Middle East: Chaldean Catholics (originally Nestorian); Greek Catholics or Melkites (originally Eastern Chalcedonian Orthodox); Armenian Catholics; Syrian Catholics; and Coptic Catholics. The Maronite Church, a sixth Eastern rite Catholic body, renounced Monothelism (i.e. Christ has a single divine will) in A.D. 1180 and accepted the supremacy of Rome. All these churches have a considerable number of members in Lebanon. But they are also scattered throughout Syria, Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. Affiliated to each of these churches are a number of monastic orders.

- The Latin-Rite (Roman) Catholic church: Wherever there are Uniates or Maronites there are also Latin-rite churches, either to minister to foreign Catholics or to run schools, hospitals, and other welfare institutions. Latin-rite Catholics do not necessarily celebrate their liturgy in Latin.

- The Protestant churches: All mainline Protestant denominations and a great number of less prominent ones are represented in most parts of the Middle East. They owe their presence to missionary endeavors that began early in the nineteenth century. Despite their small size, Protestants in the region have had an enormous impact particularly in education, Bible translation and distribution, medicine, charity, and women's welfare. They tend to concentrate in the large cities of the Levant and Egypt, and most of their members came originally from the Orthodox and Eastern Rite Catholic converts.

*Based on information obtained from *A Guide to Christian Churches in the Middle East: Present-day Christianity in the Middle East and North Africa*, by Norman A. Horner (Elkhart, Indiana: Mission Focus Publications, 1989).

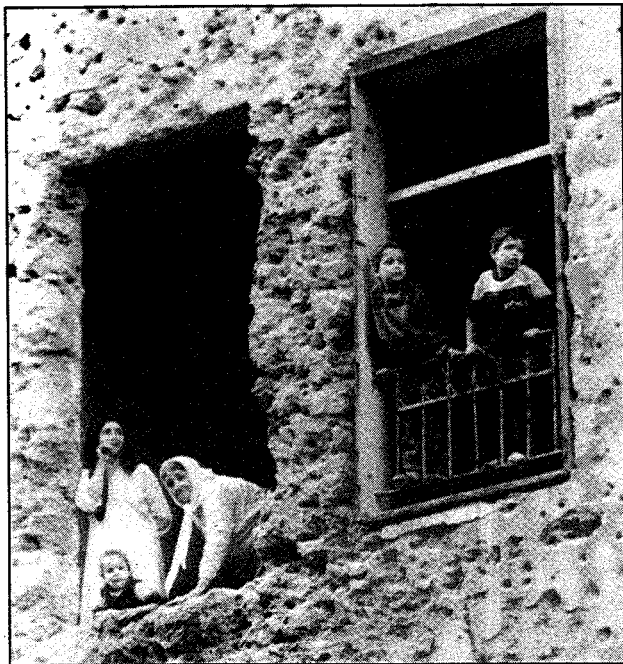
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only be a matter of time before Islam develops a more accepting attitude toward modernity. The problem is that even if this optimism regarding Islam's potential for change is true, its glacial pace is of little or no benefit to the concerns of the present and the soon-to-follow generations.

The practice of Islam-bashing is reprehensible. It is, however, a Christian duty to be forthright about theological differences and unsparing when it comes to injustice and oppression. Christian leaders cannot look the other way in the name of cordiality and civility when human rights and religious liberties are being undermined and trampled.

Religious Minorities

The focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict produces the tendency to regard the Palestinians as the only people in the region whose rights are violated. Such rights are a serious



BEIRUT — A Muslim family watches from its battered window in 1990 as the army opens roads that had been closed for 15 years during Lebanon's civil war. REUTER.

matter, but no person or community should have a monopoly on our compassion. Too much focus on the Palestinians' plight usually parallels a willful ignorance of the Egyptian Copts who have endured centuries of persecution, or Lebanese savaged by Syrian occupation forces, or the rights of ordinary Iraqi citizens, or Bahais in Iran, Jews in Syria, women throughout the Islamic world, etc. Such ignorance is expensive in a region where the very concept of human rights is weak at best. The perpetrators of this one-sidedness include some Western Christians, as evidenced by their priorities and the consistency of their agendas. More must be heard about, and done for, the rights of all oppressed Middle Easterners, and especially native co-religionists -- the Christians.

Western reluctance to take up the cause of the beleaguered Christians of the Middle East often stems from fear of being labeled as "crusaders" by the Muslims. This has created paralysis regarding work on behalf of local Christian communities. Christian Arabs have had to endure the ravages of the long-standing Islamic *dhimmi* system, which involves a reduction of non-Muslims to a degrading second-class status. The only person with full rights in an Islamic society is the mature Muslim male.

Meaningful dialogue with Muslims based on mutual respect therefore must entail an open and unabashed recognition of these somber realities. Again, these problems have roots deeper than the Arab-Israeli dispute. Even if the state of Israel had never existed, the problem of harassment of native non-Muslim minority communities would still be there for Western Christians to address. And if the Palestinians are one day granted a state of their own, Christian Palestinians will still have to contend with the unpleasant prospect of radical Islamic Palestinian fundamentalists of the Hamas movement -- which today calls the shots in the Intifada -- running the new state and reducing them to a condition of servility.

Democracy in the Middle East

A fourth problematic aspect of the dominant church view of the Middle East is the tendency to avoid crucial issues related to life in a pluralistic society based on true tolerance and respect. There is no escaping the relevance of democracy to all peoples, including those of the Middle East.

It also means that those rare instances when freedom did briefly flourish ought to be analyzed and mined for their value. Lebanon before 1975 comes to mind in this context. Despite the imperfections of the pre-war Lebanese system, it was unique in its peaceful and prosperous coexistence among Christians and Muslims and in the wide array of personal freedom it guaranteed to all citizens. This is the authentic and original meaning of the term "lebanonization," which now signifies violence and disintegration.

Many Islamic states never officially subscribed to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, thereby automatically excluding themselves from the consensus of nations on human rights matters. Further, the political culture required for democratic ideals of basic rights and freedoms to flourish is absent in predominantly Islamic states. It is the challenging question about the potential compatibility between Islam and democracy that should be of concern to Christians churches in the West. The churches long have talked about self-determination as the antidote to colonial rule. Yet not enough attention has been given to the more substantive issues regarding democracy -- particularly how Middle Eastern political countries can be pushed to fully address the meaning of rights and freedoms, and especially for minority groups. This failure imperils

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Colors and inconsistencies, as well as confusions of religious and political concepts and categories.

Unfortunately, this book is not an isolated case.

According to Malik, the NCC mission study follows the Cragg pattern. Bailey refers to the Cragg book as "the most thorough, up-to-date study in English of the history of Christianity in the Arab-speaking [sic] Middle East." While less abrasive and more mild-mannered than Cragg's book, Malik said Kimball's short work "is a watered-down version of the same perspective: apologies for Muslim behavior, Western self-incrimination, disproportionate focus on the Palestinian issue, a recitation on the Gulf War but no criticism of regional tyrants besides Saddam Hussein, the characterization of American evangelical Christians as ignorant Armageddonists, occasional jabs at Lebanon's Maronite Christian community, and little treatment of religious liberties and minority rights, among other things." Malik said the book too conveniently glosses over the real scourge afflicting Middle Eastern Christians, namely, the dehumanizing effects of the Islamic *dhimmi* system. This system reduces non-Muslims to a second-class status.

Challenging this *dhimmi* status is dangerous business. But in some quarters, where an oppressed existence under the *dhimmi* system has been accepted, religious minority rights have not figured prominently at all. One such quarter is the Middle East Council of Churches, about which the NCC mission study materials reads like an extended advertisement. The MECC was formed in 1974 out of a largely Protestant effort born in 1962, the Near East Council of Churches, and a broader Ecumenical Youth and Student Secretariat that was supported by the World Council of Churches. Like the youth movement, the MECC included representatives of the Oriental (non-Chalcedonian) and Eastern (Chalcedonian) Orthodox churches.

Understanding the MECC, Malik said, requires looking at a May, 1970 conference held in Beirut, Lebanon, under the title: "World Christian Seminar for Palestine." The principal organizers were young Lebanese and Palestinian Greek Orthodox intellectuals with a pan-Arabist outlook and a leftist political agenda. One of these, Gabriel Habib, is the current General Secretary of the MECC. The Palestine Liberation Organization was prominent at the conference, which it partially funded. This was a watershed marking the politicization of Christian priorities that Malik said led to a single-minded focus on the Palestinian problem.

After the MECC came into being, Palestine remained high on its list of priorities. (This coincided roughly with the growth of the pro-Palestinian tilt at the NCC.) The Oriental (non-Chalcedonian) Orthodox churches, with the exception of the Armenians, were the least politicized. Among the Protestants in the council, the Diocese of Jerusalem (Anglicans and Episcopalians) and, for a while, the main Beirut Protestant churches trumpeted the Palestinian cause.

The MECC on the Persian Gulf

The Persian Gulf War focused the world's attention once again on the Middle East. The MECC was clear in its condemnation of Iraq, which had illegally invaded neighboring Kuwait, but MECC General Secretary Gabriel Habib seized the opportunity to publicize the MECC's political agenda in the region, specifically the Palestinian issue. Only weeks after Iraqi tanks had rolled into Kuwait, Habib lamented, "A long time has passed since the oppression of the Palestinian people began and since their land, including Jerusalem and other Arab lands, were occupied...." Habib declared that "urgent implementation" was required of UN resolutions "not only on Kuwait, but also on Palestine, Lebanon, Cyprus, and the Middle East in general." Thus, Habib made the same point as many associated with the National Council of Churches, namely, that the problem of Hussein must be linked to a resolution of the dispute over Palestine. For an analysis of why this linkage is spurious, see the IRD Briefing Paper, "Documenting the Oldline/Ecumenical Anti-War Movement: Consistent Themes, Faulty Premises," by Fredrick P. Jones, Dana Preusch, and Lonni Jackson.

The primary group in the forefront on behalf of the Palestinians were Orthodox Arabs.

Despite the MECC's preoccupation with the Palestinian problem at the expense of other issues, it would be unfair not to mention other contributions it made to the region. For the first time since the Arian heresy of the Fourth Century, many of the Christian churches of the East have come together within a single, unified organization. Thorny theological and doctrinal differences are being aired in a friendly atmosphere at the MECC's Ecumenical Study Center based in Cyprus. Dialogue with the Muslim world helps MECC members emerge from regional isolation, though such dialogue usually concentrates on common political causes. In humanitarian relief, particularly in Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan, the MECC has done a marvelous job.

With the ending of the Cold War and the decline of the ideological left, Malik said new opportunities have opened for the MECC to diversify its agenda to include fundamental liberties and protection of minorities. With the fourth great Christian family, the Catholics, having joined the MECC not long ago, the time is right for putting aside inherited prejudices and elevating the problems of religious liberty and communal integrity for the region's Christians to center stage. This would be important for the NCC, since, as its mission study shows, it rarely ventures where the MECC fears to tread.

Weapons, Weapons, Everywhere

*But what will make for
peace in the Middle East?*

By Amy Schulz

In spite of the obvious volatility of the Middle East and the uneasy peace in the wake of the Gulf War, nations in the region continue their arms buildups, despite international efforts to control proliferation. And, obviously, many outside nations still work to supply those arms.

Since the Gulf War, the five largest suppliers, who are also the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (France, Russia, the United Kingdom, China and the United States) have increased efforts to reduce considerably the sale of arms to the Middle East. Together, these countries accounted for 90 percent of all weapons sales to the Middle East before the Gulf War. Lately, Middle Eastern countries such as Iran and Iraq are scrambling to buy up as many arms as possible in shady and under-the-table arms deals.

It is predicted that by the end of the century, Middle Eastern countries will have spent \$60 billion on arms. It will take more than just the efforts of arms suppliers if long-term solutions to the threats to peace in the Middle East are to be found.

The two biggest threats to any hope of peace are the willingness of industrial nations to sell their weapons and the frenzy of Middle Eastern countries to buy arms and use them. Many churches and ecumenical agencies have made arms sales a critical question in their commentary on the Middle East. It is a worthwhile concern, considering the current unstable situation. But the relevant question is not only who is selling arms, but alas: Who is importing the most weapons and why?

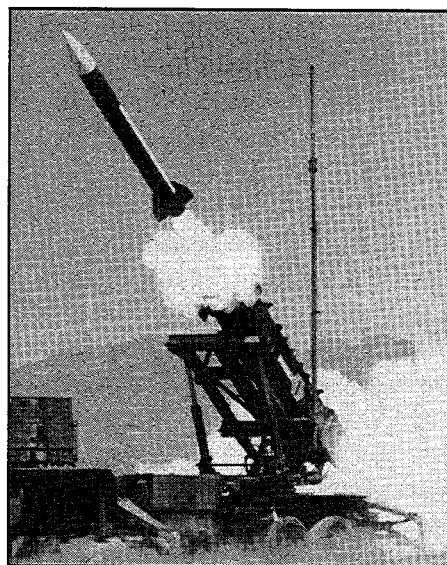
Who Is Importing the Most Arms?

The single biggest arms importer in the Third World for the past two decades has been and continues to be Iraq, according to the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. From 1969 through 1988, Iraq bought \$61 billion in weapons. Today, U.S. intelligence analysts estimate that Iraq still has 200 to 300 Scud missiles hidden. And, although Iraq has been under sanctions for almost two years, has suffered a military defeat which destroyed "large amounts" of its weapons and equipment, and is paying war reparations to Kuwait, it is still not clear if this is enough to stop the arms-hungry Saddam Hussein.

Despite his defeat, Hussein continues to be a threat.

According to CIA director Robert Gates, Hussein's country could possibly restore its military arsenals to the pre-Gulf war levels within three to five years, if UN sanctions were lifted. Iraq continues to have mobile Scud launchers and several hundred missiles, along with hidden nuclear weapons-related equipment and hidden chemical and biological weapons. Iraq also acted adversely to a UN Special Commission proposition that called for a search to find banned weapons within the country and a monitoring of all military and scientific activities.

Another primary importer is Iran. After buying \$2 billion in weapons annually since the Gulf War, Iran is expected to



Patriot air defense missiles such as the one shown here were used in Saudi Arabia and Israel during the Persian Gulf War. REUTERS.

purchase \$10 billion between 1990 and 1994. It recently bought Scud-C missiles from North Korea, and the CIA reports that these Scud-C missiles soon will be fitted with chemical warheads. Iran also bought T-72 tanks from Czechoslovakia, MiG-29 fighter aircraft from Russia, and surface-to-air missiles, F-7 aircraft and artillery from China. The CIA suspects they are producing their own biological weapons. In the future, according to a report in *Newsweek*, Iran is interested in buying solid-fuel missiles technology from China or Europe. Soon Russia is expected to deliver at least two kilo-class attack submarines to Iran.

Even after of the Gulf War, every major Middle Eastern country continues to rearm itself. This includes the United Arab Emirates, Syria, Israel, Kuwait, Yemen, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Some of these nations spend 20 percent or more of their gross national product on arms.

Who Is Selling Arms to the Region?

A big surprise to some is the role of the United States. Since the end of the Gulf War in February 1991, the United States has sold \$10.8 billion in arms to Middle Eastern countries.

Three billion dollars of this was spent on major weapons systems, such as attack helicopters.

Critics have described the United States' policy toward the arms trade as both cynical and confusing. While officially advocating restraint in arms sales, the United States is actually the largest single arms supplier to the area. Since the end of the Gulf War the United States has undertaken six major conventional arms sales (mainly to Israel, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait).

After the Gulf War, President Bush announced a plan designed to "curb the spread of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons as well as the missiles that can deliver them." This plan, the Middle East Arms Control Initiative, was proposed on May 29, 1991, and sought to restrain the destabilizing build-up of conventional arms in the region. It also focused on freezing the acquisition, production, and testing of surface-to-surface missiles and continuing toward the goal of a nuclear-free Middle East. But since the Arms Control Initiative was announced, the United States has sold \$8.5 billion in armaments to the region, according to Lee Feinstein of the Arms Control Association.

The United States sells most of its weapons to its allies in the region: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Israel and Kuwait. F-15 jets, M-1A2 tanks and AWACS have been sold to Saudi Arabia and Israel, Patriot missiles to Israel and Kuwait, and Apache helicopters to the UAE and Israel. The U.S. government claims these sales are justifiable for defensive purposes only and prevent more aggressive nations from dominating the area.

Another major arms supplier is China. Its principal customers are Iran, Israel, and Syria. China is the most distrusted of the five members of the UN Security Council on these matters and is suspected by the other members of the council of not upholding arms sales policies. China sells billions of dollars of weapons to whoever will buy them and uses the hard currency to buy more arms and modernize its arsenals. The Chinese justify this in part by pointing to western "hypocrisy": If Washington can sell arms to the Middle East, why can't Beijing?

Why the Contradiction?

The apparently contradictory continuation of arms sales simultaneously with efforts at arms reductions has many possible sources. Some are in fulfillment of contracts initiated prior to the discussions. But new sales stem both from entrenched interests, and from a perception that stability and defense must be supported in case the negotiations don't succeed. The region supplies oil and other resources, to which nations want continued access (hence, they sell to allies in the region that may be threatened).

Another economic interest, however, stems from the reality that the U.S. military can't absorb all the production that U.S. weapons makers must maintain to be profitable. The excess gets sold abroad, and the wealthy states of the

Middle East are willing customers. Similar reasons explain sales from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Germany, France, and others. For the desperate, arms sales are a quick way to acquire hard currency. This does not necessarily mean, however, that each state is unconcerned about stability in the region.

While promoting stability and making profits are not necessarily at odds, virtually everyone agrees that international agreements to control proliferation are desirable to keep future arms sales from needlessly fueling political conflicts. It is worth noting that some of the biggest importers and sellers of arms in the Middle East are showing an interest in reducing arms proliferation. In the last months, Iraq has demonstrated some willingness to negotiate with the UN on destroying their existing weapons of mass destruction. The leverage afforded by involvement in the Middle East has allowed some progress on diplomatic efforts. Without a good agreement a danger remains: will additional weapons serve defensive stability while nations negotiate or deepen hostilities which occasionally flare into war?

View from the Churches

Many Oldline Protestant and Catholic church leaders reject the validity of any arms sales and call for sweeping restrictions on conventional arms sales to the Middle East. The World Council of Churches (WCC) calls for a conventional arms control regime, and strongly urges leaders to make a commitment to reduce arms sales to the developing world. A pastoral letter from Joan Brown Campbell and Leonid Kishkovsky of the National Council of Churches after the Gulf War similarly called for a multilateral arms embargo for the region, with the implication that the suppliers, who were said to exacerbate conflicts such as the one between Iran and Iraq, should bear the main responsibility for arms control. According to Charles A. Kimball, a former NCC Middle East director and author of its 1992 mission study, vigilance by the church on this issue is necessary: "The old ways of 'doing business' are unacceptable for a host of reasons. Concerned people of faith ... must monitor what is happening in their lands as well as what is being said and done by government officials. We are all part of the problem. And if the headlong rush toward new wars is left unchecked, we will all be victims of the conflagrations."

Tranquil Order

The United States, being the leader in arms sales, has a responsibility to influence and even control the level of armament in the Middle East. The interests of peace in that region must stand as high as our interest in access to oil and other resources. It can be very tempting to fall for a simple tradeoff of assets (weapons for oil) without making larger strategic and global assessments. For example, with what we now know of Iraq, the United States sells no more arms

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to that country. Such prudent analysis regarding all others -- whether allies or potential allies -- is crucial for involvement in the politics of the Middle East. We should use our leverage to push Middle Eastern nations toward regional stability, and reduce the possibility that wars can start.

The best hope for making progress and ending this vicious cycle is for all nations to end the sale and production of arms and *to eliminate the need to use them*. The churches do well to call for this ultimate outcome. The nations in the region also must work cooperatively to construct their own regional stability. However, since the region seems far from embracing extensive peace and cooperation, responsible action on all fronts -- negotiation, economic trade, along with security assurances -- is necessary to advance toward peaceful stability.

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countless millions in the indigenous non-Muslim communities and condemns hundreds of millions of Muslims to a future devoid of any hope for substantive democratization. The Middle East needs bold, creative, consistent engagement with these questions, undertaken in the spirit of love.

Lowest-Common-Denominator Ecumenism

All Christians, eastern and western, Protestant and Catholic, low church or high, are under obligation to witness to their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of all. Just as the devout Muslim is under obligation to pray five times a day, to observe the holy fasts and feasts, and to visit Mecca on the Hajj at least once in his life, so the Christian is expected to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel wherever he or she goes. Any meaningful dialogue that hopes to transcend banal platitudes must entail a mutual recognition and respect by both sides of their respective and unavoidable spiritual obligations. For Christians this means fidelity to what I call the Kerygmatic Imperative -- the call to witness to and proclaim the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ. The freedom to do this, as well as the freedom for a Muslim to convert from Islam, should be key issues for inter-religious dialogue. To the degree that Muslims only attempt to see Christianity through the eyes of the Koran rather than as Christians see themselves and their obligations, such dialogue will be difficult.

To avoid acknowledging the existence of irreconcilable positions is not the proper way to commence meaningful dialogue. It is a recipe for sterile, least-common-denominator ecumenism. I can affirm from personal experience that a genuine Muslim appreciates and respects a sincere, outspoken, and forthright Christian far more than he would a Christian sporting an affected diplomatic air of circumspection -- one who hovers on the margins of spiritual ambiguity and avoids assertiveness and directness in the name of civility. Genuine Muslims will surprise you in the degree to which they will open up and share and disclose and grow with you if only you remain yourself and unashamed of who and what you stand for. This is true ecumenism; this is authentic neighborliness; this is real witness; this is Christian love.

Habib C. Malik, a Lebanese and an American citizen, and serves as IRD's Middle East Associate.