

URBANIZATION, ISLAM AND THE ARAB WORLD

by Harvie M. Conn

The urban lifestyle is not new to Islam. Ira Lapidus, in his book, Middle Eastern Cities reminds us that Islamic civilization has always been predominantly an urban civilization (1969:v). He continues, "For Muslims, cities often possess a special sanctity and are regarded as the sole places in which a full and truly Muslim life may be lived" (p. 47). V. F. Costello repeats the thesis. "It has been argued that Islam has a preference of urban over rural societies, a preference rooted in doctrinal and historical conditions. Islam was born in the seventh century A.D. in the urban and commercial environment of the Hedjaz in west-central Arabia, and it has been argued that its religious goals and rituals are more easily achieved in an urban context" (1977:6-7).

The Middle East can claim to have the world's longest history of continuous urban development. And Islam plays a rich part in that urban history. The early Muslims looked on nomads and villagers as merely second-class recruits to Islam, and that attitude has been held ever since. The city, writes an American sociologist, was not on the fringe of the Islamic system; "it was the system" (Palen 1981:393).

The Current Picture

From the early sixteenth century, urban decline hit the Middle East and North Africa, but from the 1920s the picture has shifted again. The Muslim world once again is returning to urban prominence. In Libya between 1954 and 1966 the proportion of the total population living in settlements with more than 20,000 people rose from 18% to 25%. Fifty percent of the population of Kuwait by the 1950s lived in cities of 100,000 or more. Amman, Jordan in 1966 was over ten times larger than in the 1930s. "Most of the countries [of the Middle East] now have more than one-third of the population living in towns, making the Middle East more physically urbanized than most of Tropical Africa, or of East, Southeast and South Asia" (Costello, 1977:33).

In the period between 1950 and 1970, urban growth in Northern Africa surpassed that of North America and all of

Europe. The percentage increase of urban population growth in Northern Africa reached 51.6% (19.1% rural). In North America it was only 17.6%, in western Europe 18.7%; Northern Europe was 9.8% (Davis 1972 [Vol. 2]:200). By 1970, 2.5% of the world's urban population increase was tabulated for northern Africa, the highest of Africa's five regional districts, and thirteenth in the world's total of twenty-two regions.

A breakdown of rural and urban populations in representative countries would look like the following:

<u>Country</u>		<u>Total</u>	<u>Rural</u>	<u>Urban</u>
(All populations in thousands.)				
Mauritania	1950	712	697	15
	1960	970	948	22
	1970	1,161	1,133	28
Morocco	1950	8,959	6,887	2,072
	1960	11,640	8,253	3,387
	1970	15,519	10,035	5,484
Libya	1950	999	787	212
	1960	1,349	1,017	332
	1970	1,850	1,329	521
Egypt	1950	20,461	13,946	6,515
	1960	26,085	16,221	9,864
	1970	33,283	18,739	14,544
Tunisia	1950	3,555	2,467	1,088
	1960	4,157	2,618	1,539
	1970	4,882	2,764	2,118
Saudi Arabia	1950	5,250	4,750	500
	1960	6,200	5,200	1,000
	1970	7,357	5,500	1,857

(Figures from: Davis 1969 [Vol. 1]:57-58, 73).

Comparisons and Characteristics

1. As with so many other parts of the world, urban population is often crowded into one large city (the "primate city"). Tehran boasted a 1956 population of 1,512,000 compared to the next largest city in Iran, Tabriz with 390,000. In Egypt, Cairo with 3,346,000, and Alexandria with 1,513,000 far outstrip the third largest

city, Ismailiya (276,000). North Africa shows the same pattern, with Casablanca, Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli outclassing all the other towns in their respective countries. In fact, in 1950 the Middle East, with a little over three percent of the world's population, contained four of the world's forty-nine cities with a population of one million or more.

2. Though the Middle East has its megacities, on the whole the cities are small by western standards. By and large they lack large and heavy industries. The population as a whole is still mostly rural.

3. Like other third world cities, a great deal of urban growth is due to migration into the cities. But a number come not from rural villages but from the smaller, traditional towns. This produces slower growth in small and medium-sized towns and relatively high rates of growth in the largest cities.

As in other cities, there is little indication of a melting pot phenomenon. Migrants tend to concentrate in the city according to their home regions. A survey of Tripoli in 1971 showed that families from the Misurata area and from other regions were living in groups. In cities like Cairo and Isfahan, migrants tend to live on the side of the city nearest their place of origin. Migrants may also cluster not only by residence but also by occupation. So, in Tripoli, those from the Jebel village of Takbal invariably become bakers just as at one time most of Cairo's porters came from Musha village.

4. Migrants tend to keep their ties with the rural and small town areas they come from originally. This seems especially pronounced in the Middle East. Unlike other city centers, many urban dwellers "exhibit characteristics and behaviour patterns that reflect their rural or village background. ... Migrants do not simply pick up urban ways; they also, in effect, ruralize the cities. Many city dwellers are still tied to rural customs and culture, and migrants shape the city as much as the city shapes them" (Palen 1981:397).

5. In other urban centers affected by the west and by modernization, secularism is said to erode aspects of traditional beliefs. But contemporary scholarship seems to indicate no similar erosion process in the Muslim city.

One noted scholar sees no essential difference between Middle Eastern villagers and city dwellers in "the religious aspect of life. ... Few systematic differences in religious behaviour between village and city have been clearly demonstrated" (Lapidus 1969:140). V. F. Costello argues that "changes in religious habits frequently accompany a move to the city" but these changes may not be due so much to the city as to twentieth century governments and their mixed attitudes to religion (Costello 1977:105).

Questions for Urban Evangelization of Muslims

1. In A.D. 500 the stronghold of Christianity was in the urban centers of North Africa. But 1,000 years later, argues Dr. Ray Bakke, the growth of Islam had virtually eradicated any Christian presence in those cities. The focus of Christianity then shifted from urban North Africa to rural Europe. And for one thousand years there was no real gain in the numerical strength of Christianity. "There was simply a swapping of urban real estate for rural real estate" (Bakke 1982:119).

How did the church fail in the urban context of North Africa? Bakke suggests the following: (1) They refused to give the tribal people the Scriptures in their own language, except in Egypt; (2) They failed to indigenize their ministries. The bishops and leaders of the church were all appointed from Rome. Africans had little control over their own urban churches; (3) They refused to deal with the race issue; (4) They refused to develop new approaches for the new urban realities; (5) The church developed a desert, escapist, monastic life for their church rather than an urban lifestyle and theology; (6) Schisms in the church, with increased attention spent on defensive apologetics. The churches thus lost their evangelistic cutting edge. (Ibid.)

Are we in danger of copying some of these same mistakes in the twentieth century? We were not ready to deal with urban Islam in the seventh century. Are we more ready now?

2. Costello argues that Muslim cities today show little signs of the anonymity and alienation often said to be characteristic of urban life (1977:103). Are there other felt needs to which the gospel may respond? How should the church respond to the problems of "overurbanization" in the Middle East -- to poverty, overcrowding, affluence? Can

these problems also become "gospel doors"?

3. Will we find it more difficult to evangelize cities in the Middle East? Does Islam's supposed preference for urban over rural societies offer resistance to the gospel as strong in the city as in the village and town? Even more so?

4. Recent migrants to third world cities often show signs of culture shock in moving from the town to the city or from the village to the city. This kind of culture shock has proved to be an open door opportunity for the gospel among recent urban migrants. Will the supposed uniqueness of the Muslim compatibility with the city minimize this opportunity? Should church and missionary focus their urban evangelism on newly arrived migrants rather than older, more settled in migrants? Is this a unique "hidden people" within Islam with greater potential for church growth?

5. What kind of city offers the greatest potential for evangelistic fruit in the Middle East? The megacities where social change and openness seems often to be more characteristic? or the smaller cities more typical of the Middle East?

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