

## Middle East and Northern Africa Prayer Focus

# How to Intercede When the "Arab Spring" Starts Looking More Like a Christian Winter

By H. Genet

Those praying consistently for gospel advance worldwide find focusing on the people of the Middle East and North Africa especially challenging.

In the first place, media reports of developments in the region form a confusing, constantly shifting patchwork. So it's difficult to spot emerging patterns. Last year's Arab Spring, for instance, began as a popular demand for government accountability, open politics, and equal citizenship. The popular agitation for an end to repression of opinion, to bullying, and to torture should have led to greater freedom for the Church. Instead, however, worldwide concern for the Church is growing over countries such as Egypt, where Islamist groups were successful in government elections. Since the fall of former president Hosni Mubarak's government, Christians in Egypt have witnessed increasing attacks on churches, Christian businesses, and individuals. Many endeavor to leave.

Then, too, missionary correspondence is often intentionally vague, as those who represent us in the region protect their precarious status and the safety of those exploring or submitting to the claims of the gospel. Some effective workers we support do not permit their names to appear at all in our print materials.

But as access to prayer request specifics becomes more restricted, earnest intercession for the region becomes more urgent. So how can we pray effectively? One Middle East-based mission executive reports that church leaders there are asking Christians in the West to raise "a tsunami of prayer" for the region. They suggest *four key requests*:

### **1. Pray for the welfare of Christians in the region.**

*For their fortitude.* At least half a million Christians have fled Iraq since the US-led invasion in 2003, diminishing their community—estimated at 1 million to 1.4 million before the war—to a mere 500,000 under the pressure of sectarian killings, church attacks, and an increasingly Islamist political culture. The already second-class status of Christians is being further eroded, even in Egypt, where they form 10 percent of the population.

*For their discernment.* Under intense pressure, Christians have tended to uncritically align themselves with dictators who have offered them cover. In Syria, for example, where Christians make up about 8 percent of the population, there is justifiable fear the uprising will lead to an Islamist government more hostile to Christians than Mr. Assad's Alawite-led regime. The largely Sunni opposition claims that Assad is

deliberately provoking sectarian hostility to scare minorities—including Christians—into maintaining support for his regime. The dilemma Syrian Christians face is that the longer they back the Assad regime, the greater the resentment they breed among the opposition, which will probably eventually come to power. Christians face similar tough choices in other nations of the region.

*For religious liberty for all. But where there is no liberty, for multiplied grace to those being persecuted.*

*That the light of Christ will shine through those who share Jesus' suffering.*

## **2. Pray for a vision of "fields white to harvest" throughout the region.**

*For Christians to perceive and grasp the opportunities they do have.* Examples: Egypt has a strikingly high rate of Bible distribution. Iraqis are more open to the gospel than ever before. Iran is witnessing its greatest church growth in centuries, despite the death penalty for Muslims who become Christians.

*For opportunities for Christians to share the good news with neighbors and colleagues.*

*For them to be equipped to do so effectively.*

*That they will welcome and disciple converts from Islam.* Those exiting Islam are uniformly rejected by their families and clans. Sadly, rather than embracing them, members of established churches often view them with suspicion, excluding them from the fellowship they desperately need.

## **3. Pray for pastors and church leaders, often targeted by those opposed to Christianity.**

*That evangelical Christians will take a clear gospel stand.*

*For them to find ways to build bridges for Muslim-Christian interaction.*

*For traditional Christian communities.* Some have an evangelical wing, such as the Salvation of Souls Society, loosely attached to the Coptic Church in Egypt.

*That Christians will have a role to play in shaping new governments.* Uphold those involved in politics. One example is Britain's Anglican Canon Andrew White, working in Iraq, who has brought together Sunni, Shiite, and Christian leaders. As a result, joint statements have been issued urging the end to the persecution of Christians.

*That Christians in the West will take up the challenge of this region, anticipating a gospel harvest.*

## **4. Pray for the stances of governments worldwide.**

*For the preservation and expansion of liberties for minorities.* Be alert for incremental positive developments among nations with a Muslim alignment. Turkey, in which an Islamic party has ruled since 2002, is a good example. It has praised the virtues of democratic secular rule to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. It has also scolded Iraq's Shiite-led government for not easing tensions with minority Sunnis.

And it has told Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon to raise their voices against the violence in Syria or else “remove the word ‘Islam’ from their names.”

*For the transformation of existing Middle Eastern governments.* Request that efforts to control the flow of information will continue to be outflanked. Ask that governments pressure Islam to reconfigure to be compatible with democracy—majority rule coupled with protection for minorities—rather than allowing Muslim clergy to curtail the liberties of their citizens.

*For the new post-revolutionary Arab governments,* such as Libya and Egypt. Ask that they listen to the millions of young Muslims who clearly prefer to achieve self-governance and dignity by peaceful means rather than following a violent path to a state rule by unelected clerics. Ask for a moderating of the mosque-and-state relationship. The leading Islamist party in Tunisia, Al Nahda, is a good example. It recently announced that *shari’a* (Islamic law) should not be the source for all laws. It said the constitution should simply acknowledge that Islam is the state religion (as the old constitution did). The party prefers to unite all Tunisians and set an example for other Arab states in transition. A woman, in fact, is heading up the panel to define rights and liberties.

*That Western governments would speak out against persecution.* Recently, for example, the UK’s Archbishop of Canterbury, addressing the House of Lords, moved that “this House takes note of the situation of Christians in the Middle East.”

To these key requests from Christian leaders in the region, we should add concentrating on our own gospel involvements there:

**Pray for those whose ministry in the Middle East and North Africa we support.**

*For those you know serving in the region.* Ask that they and their families thrive and remain productive in an often hostile environment. Ask that they be discerning about the ways they identify with the existing church, with converts from Islam, and with the target group for evangelism.

*For those who impact the region peripherally,* bearing witness as business professionals, enabling the training of Christian leaders, holding dental clinics among tribal peoples, providing resources and refreshment for expatriate workers and local pastors, etc.

*For those whose ministry cannot be publicly acknowledged.* A representative example is a worker with a team in Syria that made the controversial decision to remain there throughout this past year of upheaval. She returned to the U.S. this month earlier than originally planned, only because the American embassy closed this spring before she could renew her passport! “God has been good to us in the past few months,” she reports, in spite of some downsides: co-workers who left

temporarily or permanently, and the cancellation of church planting training at a local church. Upsides have included being one of very few “workers on the ground” to whom outside media ministries could forward the names of seekers who had contacted them, and seeing one of these seekers baptized and being individually disciplined.

**Pray also for the Middle East immigrants in our suburbs.**

*For ways for us to provide a gospel follow-through* to the many families spending four mornings every week in our Commons as they take the World Relief-sponsored ESL (English as a Second Language) classes.

**Focus your prayer for this diverse region by geographic chunks**

*Eastern North Africa*

This is a crucial transitional period for *Egypt*. The dominant Freedom and Justice Party (tied to the Muslim Brotherhood) has sometimes promised to enshrine into the constitution protection for the nation’s 8 to 12 million Coptic Christians. Pray for this to materialize. While the revolution freed *Libya* from Muammar Qaddafi’s tyrannical rule, evangelism of Libyan citizens remains illegal. And the essentially desert tribal society is splintering and rife with vendettas. The strongman of *Eritrea* follows Marxist ideology, tolerates but regulates Orthodox, Catholic, and Lutheran churches, and persecutes all others.

*Western North Africa*

Pray for the evangelism of millions of North Africans working and resident in France and other European nations. The post-revolutionary government of *Tunisia* continues to maintain a secular tone, granting more freedom to women than most Muslim countries. In *Algeria*, there is a significant response to the gospel among the Berbers of the Atlas Mountains. The ruling monarch of *Morocco* is relatively benevolent. But Christians are limited to meeting in homes, and more than 100 expatriate Christians were deported in 2010. Pray for official recognition of the legitimate existence of believers as Moroccan citizens.

*Africa’s Sahara and Sahel Nations*

Besides *Libya*, *Senegal* and *Mauritania* are primarily desert. Pray that an initial turning to the gospel of individuals of the traditionally nomadic Tuareg tribe and other Bedouins will continue. Slavery still persists in some areas. Although overwhelmingly Muslim, Senegal is a secular state with religious freedom. The Sahel (or Sudan) is a semi-arid belt between the Sahara Desert and the rain forest. It includes *Mali*, *Burkina Faso*, *Niger*, *Chad*, and *Sudan*. Sudan enforces *shari’a* law and has destroyed churches and murdered pastors.

*The Horn of Africa*

*Somalia*, Africa's most failed state, is plagued by the rivalries of clan warlords. Chaos has created a haven for smugglers, bandits, pirates, and terrorists. Islamists seek to enforce order through *shari'a* law. The murder of converts from Islam to Christianity is increasingly common.

#### *Nations of the Eastern Mediterranean*

*Syria* is officially a secular state. During strongman Bashar al-Assad's brutal crackdown on the year-old insurgency led by the Sunni Muslim majority, he has protected minority groups along with his Alawites, an offshoot of Islam considered heretical by other Muslims. (Alawites constitute nearly 8 percent of the population, Christians 6 percent or more). *Lebanon* is constitutionally divided by religious communities, a Shiite plurality remains in a decades-old power struggle with Sunni, Maronite Christian, and Druze communities. In the Palestinian areas occupied by *Israel*, the radical Gaza-based Islamic group Hamas recently reconciled with its more moderate West Bank rival Fatah. Hamas has already worked to curb attacks on Israel proper from Gaza. Pray that it will move toward accepting Israel's right to exist under a two-state solution. As you pray for our STAMP team going to Israel late this year, remember that far fewer Christians have emerged from the ethnically Jewish community than from the Arab community. King Abdullah provides steady leadership for the constitutional monarchy of *Jordan*, in which Palestinians now outnumber the original Bedouins. Islam is the state religion, but the constitution guarantees the free exercise of religious belief and worship. From 1980 to 2010 the Christian proportion of the nation has dropped from 6.5 to 2.2 percent, owing to a high rate of Christian emigration and an influx of Muslim refugees.. Evangelical numbers, however, have doubled.

#### *The Arabian Peninsula and Gulf Nations*

The birthplace of Islam and custodian of its holiest sites, *Saudi Arabia* is a semi-feudal absolute monarchy. Conversions from Islam receive the death penalty. The extreme Wahabi form of Islam abuses power through a corrupt judicial system and religious police. Millions in oil revenue is spent to propagate Islam worldwide. Christian expatriates are subjected to strict surveillance. *Yemen*, the Arab world's poorest country has a rapidly growing youth population. The southern country of Aden was joined to the northern country in 1990, but loyalties remain primarily tribal. The dictatorial president was recently removed. The legal system is based on *shari'a* law. A sultan rules a relatively progressive and open society in *Oman*, and opposes extremist strains of Islam. The *United Arab Emirates* is a federation of sheikhdoms that affords relative religious freedom. An influx of workers, admitted from Pakistan, India, the Philippines and elsewhere to work in the oil fields, now outnumbers the original Bedouin inhabitants. The current Emir of *Qatar* wrested power from his father in 1995, and generally promotes open and progressive policies, including allowing Al-Jazeera television to operate on its soil. But the majority expatriate population is subject to strict anti-proselytism laws. Oil revenues are declining in *Bahrain*, and a Shiite majority is under the thumb of a Sunni

monarchy. Many congregations among the large expatriate community are from south India. The ruling sheikh and his family exercises quasi-autocratic control of *Kuwait*. Reliance is on oil revenue and foreign labor. In *Iraq*, Sunni Muslim strongman Saddam Hussein launched gas attacks on the Kurdish population (roughly 25 percent of the population) and persecuted Shia Muslims, but tolerated Christians. Now, however, after years of being in charge, the Sunni minority is bristling at the ascendancy of the Shiite majority. Over the last two decades, harassment has led half of the members of the Catholic-linked Chaldean Church, and Armenian and Orthodox churches, plus the ancient Assyrian and Mandaean churches, to emigrate. But the small evangelical segment is growing at an unprecedented rate, particularly in the Kurdish north.

### *The Middle East's non-Arab Nations*

*Turkey* consists of more than 70 percent Turkic peoples, with the balance split between Iranians and Kurds. The military has savaged Kurdish separatist pockets in the southeast, but legal reforms have improved the Kurdish situation. A Muslim political party is currently in power in this officially secular state, where constitutional guarantees of religious freedom have not been enforced. The condition for entry into the European Union that prohibits including religion on identity cards could ease pressures on Christians. More than a millennium of bitter wars with "Christian" Europe makes conversion to Christianity, which accounts for less than 1 percent of the population, appear almost an act of treason to most citizens. Pray for Turkey to steer a moderate path between hardline nationalism and fundamentalist Islam. In *Iran*, the overthrow of the Shah in the Islamic Revolution of 1979 resulted in a religious dictatorship ruled by Shiite Muslim mullahs. A growing disillusionment with the Ayatollahs has been accompanied by massive numbers—at least 100,000—turning to Jesus. This multiplication of underground house churches is a remarkable development in a country able to apply the death sentence for apostasy. While the Baha'i are severely persecuted as a heretical sect of Islam, the constitution does recognize Jews, Zoroastrians; Assyrian and Armenian Christians are also permitted to meet, using their languages, but prohibited from worshipping in Farsi, the language of the majority. Minorities include Kurdish and Turkic peoples, largely Sunni Muslims.