

Middle East Missionaries Urge God-Seeking During Violence

Bloody protests against an **anti-Muslim film** that began in the Middle East have reached as far as Australia and Indonesia, and continue to roil the wider Islamic world.

Terrorists seized on the anger (or coordinated it, as news reports now indicate) to launch a deadly Sept. 11 attack in Libya, killing the U.S. ambassador and three other Americans. U.S. embassies have been breached by rioters in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Sudan and received threats in many other countries. Demonstrations and violence have spread to Pakistan, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Iran and other countries—more than 20 and counting.

The latest round of rage against America and the West may die down, or it may go on for a long time, as old grievances and the political struggles unleashed by the Arab Spring revolutions ignited in December 2010 continue.

“The reality is the Middle East is going to be turbulent for the foreseeable future and beyond that,” Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations and a former State Department official, told *The New York Times*. “It’s going to present the United States with any number of difficult choices.”

It also presents a choice for U.S. Christians who, like other citizens, are weary of wars and terrorism—and angry about ongoing attacks on their people and their values. Is it time to get out of the Middle East once and for all? The political answer to that question needs to be firmly separated from the spiritual answer, urge American Christian workers in the Middle East.

“From a human perspective, we have every right to hate one

another,” admitted one worker based in the region. “But we can’t look at this through human eyes only. We have to see this from God’s perspective. If we don’t, we’re going to miss God’s pursuit of the nations.”

Another Middle East-based worker fully understands the anger and frustration Americans feel more than 10 years after 9/11 as attacks and counterattacks drag on. But he appealed to Christians to take a “long, hard look” at their own hearts.

“To those who say, ‘Well, they hate us, so we hate them,’ what did Jesus say?” he asked. “Love your neighbor. ‘Well, they’re our enemies.’ Jesus says to love your enemy. We need to get back to the Bible. The **Bible** says there will be [followers of Christ] from every tribe, tongue and nation. We’re nowhere near that among peoples in North Africa and the Middle East. There’s work to be done.”

Committed local believers in some of the toughest places in the region are setting the example—such as a young Christian in one Middle Eastern nation who isn’t letting the turmoil slow him down.

“I had coffee with Mark* this morning, and he was not terribly concerned,” a worker said of the young man. “He said many Christians here are leaving, and those that are staying are concerned about the increasing Islamization in the country. His dad really wants him to travel to Australia to live with an uncle there. But [he wants to train] young people to start new groups and learn to disciple new believers. He’s really focused on the work right now and is somewhat oblivious to the things going on around us.”

In another country rocked by protests and mounting extremism, Abdel,* a young believer, recently suffered a serious beating—and lost several teeth—at the hands of four robbers. Two other young believers escaped the attack.

“The amazing thing about this is how [Muslims in] the

community [have] come to their aid,” reported a worker in the country. “They went to the thieves’ house and retrieved [Abdel’s] laptop and his phone. Many in the neighborhood came over last night to check on him and give their regrets that something like this happened to them. The believers that all live together in this one house are considered ‘good people,’ and the neighbors wanted to express their shame about what happened to them.

“Many new relationships have formed because of this incident. Abdel decided to show mercy on these guys and not press charges. ... Abdel and his friends continue to share boldly in the face of such trials and are seeing some fruit. What the enemy desired for evil, to shut them up by smashing them in the mouth, the Lord has used for good, shouting from the rooftop of a house of Light about the good news of the Messiah.”

Still another young believer in the same area broke his wrist in a fall. He loves to hand out Christian materials and books, “so he just uses the other hand,” said the worker. “Believers here are still working hard, pressing on in the face of tough times. There is a spiritual war that is much bigger than the political war that they are seeing on TV.”

A worker in another city was walking on a beach recently when he encountered six young Muslim men. Their long beards indicated their religious conservatism. They were sitting in a circle chanting verses from the Koran, Islam’s holy book.

“As I passed by, I greeted them and they me,” the worker recounted. “They invited me to sit with them. ... We had 90 minutes of talk about Jesus and their religion.”

The conversation became heated as the young men, obviously trained in aggressive Islamic apologetics, lectured the worker about the error of his beliefs.

“They were very intense in telling me how wrong I was in what

I believed and how wrong the Bible was," he said. "When they would ask questions that were outside of my skill to answer, I would say, 'I don't know' or 'I don't understand it, but it is written. ...' They affirmed that this was a more honest answer than giving a simplistic or trite answer that they have seen given on TV talk shows by preachers or church leaders. ...

"They had been trained to attack intelligently and if we had not been in a public place they might have used more than words in their attack, because they were intent on establishing a kingdom ruled by their sect of religion and would not tolerate alternate beliefs if they were in power.

"They repeated several times that I was the first 'real Christian' that they had ever met. I replied that I was sorry, because there are actually many 'real Christians,' even among their fellow countrymen. They said that they would pray that my eyes would open and I would follow God's path of their religion, and that they hoped we would be together in heaven. ...

"They were the first guys I have met who actually asked questions and then waited while I thought about the best answer and did my best to give my answer in very simple English and Arabic. We exchanged phone numbers, so maybe we can meet again, in daylight in a public place."

Even in broad daylight, the beach encounter wasn't comfortable—and probably wasn't safe. But it occurred because the worker took a chance to listen and share.

That's the kind of boldness that will be required in the days and years ahead, Christian workers say.

"Prayer against fear is a big request, not only for workers, but especially for national believers," said one veteran of ministry in the Middle East. "Always we pray that these demonstrations and unrest will open more opportunities for the sharing of Truth."

Another worker put it this way: “We are convinced that events like this are caused by the enemy for distraction. Pray for [us] to stay focused on what we are here to do—and **pray** that your hearts don’t become hardened to these precious people that live in darkness.”

That’s the bottom line for the men and women putting their lives on the line daily. They hope the folks in U.S. churches will understand—and join them in the task.

“People here are craving life,” one Middle East worker said. “They’re craving change, and not just political and economic change. Their deep heart cry is for answers. What they grew up with is not giving them answers. [The protests and turmoil eventually] will create even more of a spiritual harvest. What men meant for evil, God will use for good.”

* Names have been changed.