

INTERCEDE

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Promoting Freedom of Speech Among Christians and Muslims

By Fred Farrokh

Storm clouds are gathering on the horizon and a chill wind blows. While Muslim countries limit free speech, it is troubling to see these trends coming to historically Christian nations. Limiting free speech may be detrimental to Christians and also to the spiritual well-being of Muslims. Also, these new trends come at a time when more Muslims than ever are interested in examining the biblical faith.

This article seeks to provide perspective to Christians on free speech issues related to Islam, inter-faith dialogue, and sharing the gospel with Muslims. It looks at major questions regarding free speech at a time when controversy and confusion are swirling around this issue. This article begins with a hypothetical situation, and then proceeds to a question and answer format. Suppose a Muslim named Ahmed and his Christian friend John are sipping coffee together at a coffee shop and the following conversation ensues:

Ahmed: “John, I believe the Quran is the Word of God.”

John: “That’s interesting. While I respect your belief, I don’t share that belief. Rather, I believe the Bible is the Word of God.”

Ahmed: “I don’t believe in the Bible. It is *muharraf* (corrupted). Don’t you believe in the prophet Muhammad?”

John: “No I don’t believe in Muhammad, since he did not affirm Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.”

Ahmed: “Jesus is neither Lord nor Savior. I don’t believe people are born sinners so we don’t need a Savior. Jesus was a great prophet and we love him. Muhammad was correct. But let’s agree to disagree.”

John: “Sounds great. We can take up the discussion another time. Now, who do you think is the best soccer player in the world: Cristiano Ronaldo or Leo Messi?”

As these two men were talking, each made statements with which the other did not agree. Both shared deeply cherished beliefs and contradicted the beliefs of the other. Both were bearing witness to their faith. Each was sharing the orthodox principles of Islam and Christianity, respectively.

While this peaceable interaction ended in a positive fashion, even these types of conversations could someday be restricted by free speech limitations imposed on Christians by political activists. Now, to our questions...

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Until All Have Heard

How then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? – Romans 10:14

Mark Brink

International Director
Global Initiative:
Reaching Muslim Peoples



I recently attended a conference in Asia where over 800 workers and participants gathered for five days to seek the Lord's direction about the future of global ministry to Muslims. Powerful messages encouraged us to face the challenges and seize the opportunities. We were especially challenged to press forward in prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Apostle Paul reminded Timothy to "Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called" (1 Tim. 6:12a). Participants at the Asia conference were especially reminded of this truth. Christians from Muslim backgrounds shared joyful testimonies of their paths to Christ and the cross—in spite of persecution and hardship. They rejoiced that the cost paid by their suffering was worthy of the prize of Christ Jesus. One convert from Islam spoke passionately of conflicts with his family, difficulties in his community, and death threats. He reminded us that temporary injuries and obstacles should serve to spur growth in our faith. His testimony was like a modern-day account from the Book of Acts, and served as a powerful reminder to "fight the good fight of the faith and take hold of the eternal life to which we are called."

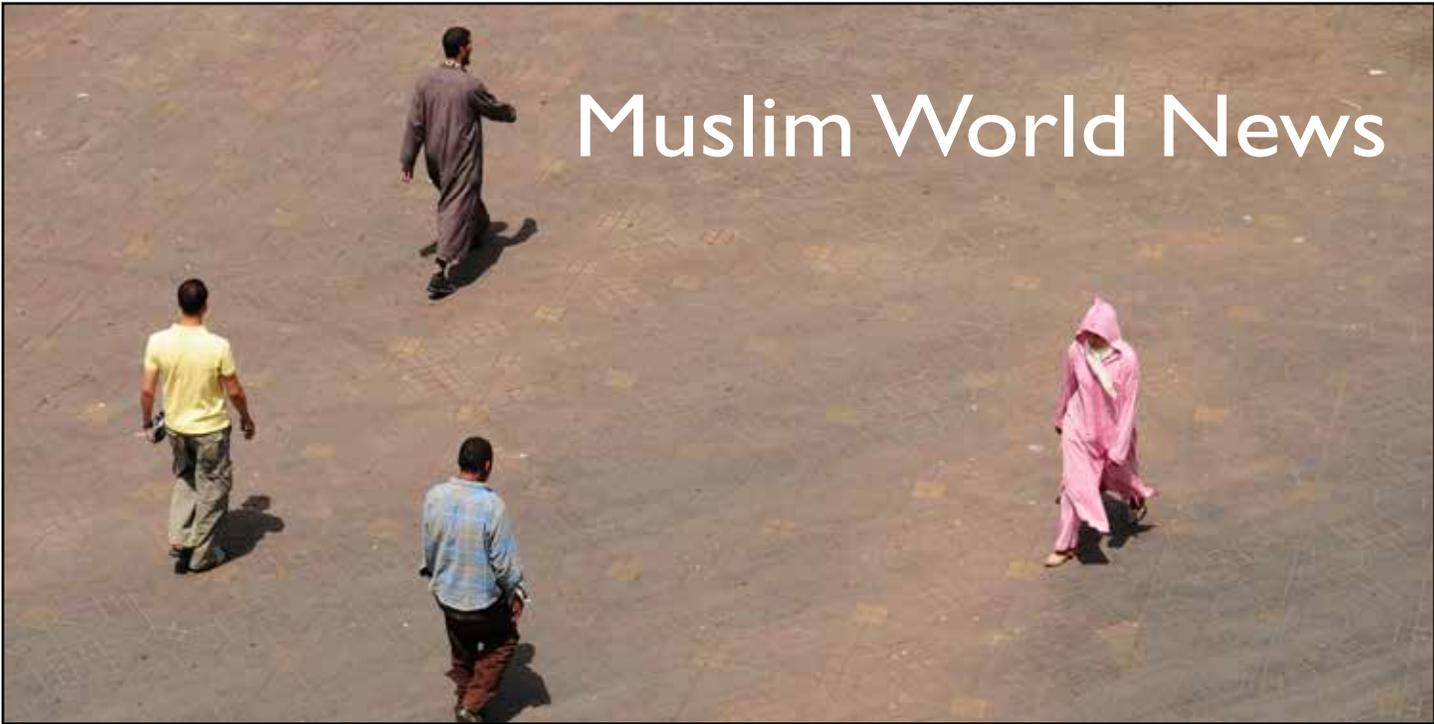
At the conclusion of the event, all participants were challenged to commit to a prolonged period of intercession. The expressed goal was that "together we commit to believe the Lord for an immeasurable harvest of Muslim souls during the next ten years." Significantly, Christians from Muslim backgrounds challenged each other to take their place in the work of evangelizing Muslim unreached peoples groups. Participants left the event excited to see what God would do next, while fully realizing that "it is not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit" that the task of global Muslim evangelization will be accomplished.

Friends, let us not draw back from our commitment to faithfully intercede on behalf of over 1.6 billion Muslims. They desperately need salvation, found only in Jesus the Savior. May we never become so comfortable in our churches and Christian environments that we forget the spiritual condition of those who live just one step away from a lost eternity in the fires of hell. May the joys of experiencing the riches of Christ Jesus never lead us to apathy. Let us remem-

ber that *multitudes have never had an opportunity to hear the good news of the gospel.*

We are greatly encouraged that more Muslims are coming to faith in Christ than ever before. On the other hand, we are faced with growing radical Islamic terrorism and global Islamic expansion. The growing Islamic presence, especially in the West, continues to produce tension. The lead article of this *Intercede* addresses key points about freedom of speech. May this article not only inform us, but also help us to discern the spiritual forces behind these present-day realities.





Shutting the Doors

Algeria

A church in Algeria's northwestern town of Aïn Turk has been closed down by local authorities. The church, affiliated to the Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA), was sealed off by police on November 9, 2017. Authorities in Oran claimed the church had been used to "illegally print gospels and publications intended for evangelism."

The police notification also stated that the church did not have state approval. But the president of the EPA, Rev. Mahmoud Haddad, denied any wrongdoing, saying the justifications for closing the church were "unfounded."

"Firstly, this community is indeed affiliated to the Protestant Church of Algeria, which has been officially recognized by the government since 1974 and is accredited with both the Ministry of the Interior and the local government," he said. "Also there is no printing activity of gospels or Christian publications inside these premises."

A new constitution, passed in February 2016, established freedom of religious worship. Article 36 states that freedom of religious worship is guaranteed in compliance with the law. But in practice, a number of churches were ordered to cease all religious activities on the grounds that they were in breach of a 2006 law which regulates non-Muslim worship. – *World Watch Monitor*

Teenager Accused of Blasphemy

Pakistan

Five Christian families in rural Pakistan have gone into hiding after death threats were made against an 18-year-old because of his alleged blasphemy against Islam.

Sonu Arshad, who lives in Sukheki, belongs to one of the families—the only Christians in the village. The families fled on November 3, after a Facebook page purporting to be that of a local television channel posted a photograph of the teenager and asked locals to "burn his church and give him the death penalty."

There were rumors that a mob formed following the local Muslim community's Friday prayers, but the chief of police in the nearby city of Daska told *World Watch Monitor* the situation was now "under control" and that a police case had been filed against the unidentified people who created the fake Facebook page. – *World Watch Monitor*

Church Demolitions

Sudan

Deputy Secretary of State John J. Sullivan has called on Sudan to "immediately suspend" its demolition of churches. He said the recent International Religious Freedom report "noted instances of the arrest, detention, and intimidation of religious leaders, and the denial of permits for the construction of new churches; restrictions on non-Muslim religious groups from entering the country; and the censorship of religious material."

His comments come a month after the U.S. lifted economic sanctions on Sudan, and as Sudanese church leaders continue to face calls from the government to hand over control of their churches. Five Sudanese Church of Christ (SCOC) leaders were detained in Khartoum for refusing to hand over ownership of their church to government officials, by transferring authority from an elected committee to a state-sanctioned rival committee. – *World Watch Monitor*

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Why is freedom of speech important? Christianity and Islam are two religions that seek to propagate their respective messages throughout the world. Islam allows for the use of force in this expansion, while Christianity does not. Nevertheless, both religions rely on speech, education, preaching, persuasion, and informing others. The Bible says, “How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard?” (Romans 10:14).

Freedom of speech is central to freedom of religion, which explains why the Framers of the United States Constitution protected both with the First Amendment. Religion and the ability to speak freely about one’s faith are central to identity. While voting and running for office involve things individuals may *do*, faith defines who they will *be*. If people are not free to be who they aspire to be, things they do may lose much of their importance.

Should speech be limited if it offends others? Not necessarily. In the story of Ahmed and John, either might have said, “You are offending me. Let me call my lawyer!” However, each had voluntarily entered into a conversation about faith. They were wise enough to realize the other person may have different beliefs, and wise enough to agree to disagree on certain points.

The problem with limiting speech that supposedly offends is that people are declaring themselves victims of “micro-aggressions,” or that their “safe space” has been infringed upon if they simply hear something with which they do not agree. This is contrary to the historical principles in which freedom has thrived. While I do not seek to invalidate the sense of offense people may experience by the speech of others, we must not justify “babying” people by protecting them from everything with which they disagree. (Unfortunately, many universities in the West are making this mistake.) Doing so results in a scarcity of different ideas and is a hallmark of totalitarian and propaganda-based oppressive regimes.

What type of speech can be restricted? Speech that incites to violence can be legitimately limited. In 1969, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled a group guilty of “incitement to violence” since the speech of the aggressor was likely to cause “imminent physical harm.”¹ In this case, the guilty party was inciting violence against racial minorities, and their actions sought to cause imminent physical harm.

Should religious speech about Islam or Christianity be limited? Not at all. Many Muslims have come to free countries because they enjoy the freedoms found in these countries. Rather than being afraid to discuss faith issues, they are happy to do so. Most are willing to peacefully agree to disagree when a Muslim, Christian, Atheist, etc., states something they do not personally believe. Ahmed, in our story, exhibited this type of maturity and self-control. People should be free to write or say what they want about Muhammad, Islam, or Allah, whether they are positive or negative things, just as they are free to say or write positive or negative things about Jesus, the Bible, or Christianity. If people feel these statements or writings are incorrect, they can refute them publicly by providing correct information. This is the open marketplace of ideas that is currently under threat.

What are examples that threaten free religious speech? A clear example occurred in 2012, when, after the Benghazi terrorist attack, President Barack Obama made the following statement: “The future must not belong to those who slander the prophet of Islam.”² History has shown this statement was made to cover up a terrorist event which would have caused negative political fallout during an election cycle. Nevertheless, Obama’s statement about slandering the prophet of Islam raises more questions than it answers. In our story, John stated he did not believe Muhammad was a prophet, nor did he believe in Muhammad’s book, the Quran. Could this be considered slander? Who makes that decision? Is it even possible to slander a historical figure who has been dead for 1,300 years but whose philosophy impacts billions of people?

Another example comes from the all-important online marketplace of ideas: “Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (CDA) under the First Amendment... provides immunity from lawsuits to Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, thereby permitting these social media giants to engage in government-sanctioned censorship and discriminatory business practices free from legal challenge.”³ The article cited here describes how these online giants are censoring speech critical of Islam. A critical question must be asked: How will these issues of censorship finally be decided?

Is a double standard emerging between free speech regarding Christianity and free speech regarding Islam? I fear this double standard is emerging. Turning once again to John and Ahmed, they were essentially making the same type

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of statements. John said Muhammad was not a true prophet. Ahmed said our Savior, Jesus Christ, was not really a Savior. Ahmed stated the orthodox Islamic doctrine (known as *Tahrif*) that our Bible has been corrupted. John, on the other hand, said he did not believe the Quran was from God.

Therefore, if John can be accused of slandering Muhammad, then Ahmed could likewise be accused of slandering Jesus. If John is guilty of slandering the Quran, then Ahmed must be guilty of slandering the Bible. Yet, Christians are not protesting in the way some Muslims do. Of course, none of this speech should be restricted. Each person should be free to state his beliefs, and if he likes, back it up by writing a paper or book on the subject.

What is the Islamic position regarding free speech about Islam and Muhammad? Though many Muslims appreciate intellectual freedom, the Islamic position on free speech regarding Muhammad tends to be a one-way street. That is, Islamic law gives people freedom to make positive statements regarding Muhammad, the Quran, and Islam, but they are restricted from making negative statements. If, in our story, Ahmed had been persuaded by John to reject Muhammad and Islam, the punishment according to Islamic Law is clear. Muhammad made a statement regarding Muslims, which all schools of Islamic Law accept: “If someone discards his religion, kill him” (Sahih al-Bukhari, Vol. 4, Book 52, Hadith 260).⁴ Muhammad’s “Law of Apostasy” is the most famous statement of “incitement to violence” in human history. Along these lines, Sura 33:57 makes the following statement regarding Muhammad: “Those who malign Allah and His messenger, Allah hath cursed them in the world and the Hereafter, and hath prepared for them the doom of the disdained” (Pickthall translation).

The Penal Code of Pakistan includes the “Blasphemy Law” 295-c, which restricts negative statements about Muhammad: “Whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation or by any imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) shall be punished with death, or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to [a] fine.”⁵

Many Pakistani Christians have been persecuted through fabricated 295-c charges. Once a person is charged with blasphemy, anyone who attempts to provide shelter, legal

assistance, or financial help will most likely also experience persecution. Fortunately, not all people are this closed-minded. I once asked a Pakistani Sunni imam in North America, “If one simply does not believe in Muhammad, is this blasphemy?” He stated that, in his opinion, it was not. The question confronting Western leaders is whether they want a continuation of Western free speech, which benefits all people, or a restricted system in which elites decide what can be said. Students of Soviet Communism, German Nazism, and similar oppressive governments realize that the jaws of tyranny can close very quickly when it comes to free speech.

Should free speech regarding Muhammad and Islam be restricted if it is likely to result in a violent reaction by Muslims? This answer should be an easy “no,” yet it will take some explaining. Let’s re-visit the story of John and Ahmed with different outcomes. Suppose other Muslims in the coffee shop heard John say he did not believe in Muhammad or the Quran. Suppose they started a riot because they say no one should be able to slander or malign the prophet of Islam. Who has incited the violence? Is it John? Or is it Muhammad?

In another scenario, suppose Ahmed has mulled over John’s testimony and they later continue this discussion. Suppose Ahmed eventually came to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. If Ahmed’s Muslim friends heard of this, they could legitimately kill him according to the Islamic Law of Apostasy quoted above. In this case, who would be responsible for inciting the violence? John? Ahmed? Ahmed’s friends? None of the above. Once again, the violence was incited by the teachings of Muhammad.

It is Muhammad’s statements and own example which have historically restricted free speech in the Muslim world. Fortunately, new media, new technology, and many brave people are starting to thaw out this freeze.

What are examples of people trying to preserve free speech about Muhammad and Islam? When Muslim background believers in Christ publicly state they have left Islam and Muhammad for the Lord Jesus Christ, their bravery is a service to all Muslims. They are stating they are not willing to be frozen into silence by threats. Those who have organized free speech events regarding Muhammad also must be commended for their public service. Pamela Geller, for

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example, has organized these types of events and has survived credible death threats.⁶ Whatever one may think of Ms. Geller's style, tone, or politics, she provides an *immeasurable* public service to both Christians and Muslims by keeping free speech open in a Western context in which once-inviolable free speech rights are under threat.

Wafa Sultan is a Syrian woman who has also exhibited tremendous courage. In her famous debate with Imam Ibrahim al-Khouli, she made this profound statement to him regarding freedom of religion and incitement to violence: "You can believe in stones, as long as you don't throw them at me."⁷ These brave women are often described as Islamophobes and enemies of Muslims. Yet, upon closer analysis, they are actually the best friends Muslims could ever have by risking their lives for freedom of thought and speech about issues important to Muslims. Islam teaches that Muhammad is "the perfect man" (Arabic, *al-Insan ul-Kamil*). Should not people be free to discuss whether this is so?

What is Islamophobia? "Islamophobia" is another new term that has been created in the West.⁸ Islamophobia refers to a "dislike of or prejudice against Islam or Muslims, especially as a political force."⁹ Even this definition is problematic because Christians are called to *love Muslims*, yet without necessarily liking the *religion of Islam*. Does this position make Christians Islamophobic? Should Christians prove they are not Islamophobic by stating nice things about a religion that denies the very heart of the gospel? Again, the answer to each of these questions must be "no."

The key to the above definition involves understanding Islam "as a political force." Islam is not just a religion, but also a political force. Many Muslims have left Islamic countries for Western lands to escape political forms of Islam. Political Islam thrives where it can create a spirit of intimidation, and paves the way for even more paralyzing types of fear, including the fear that terrorism engenders.

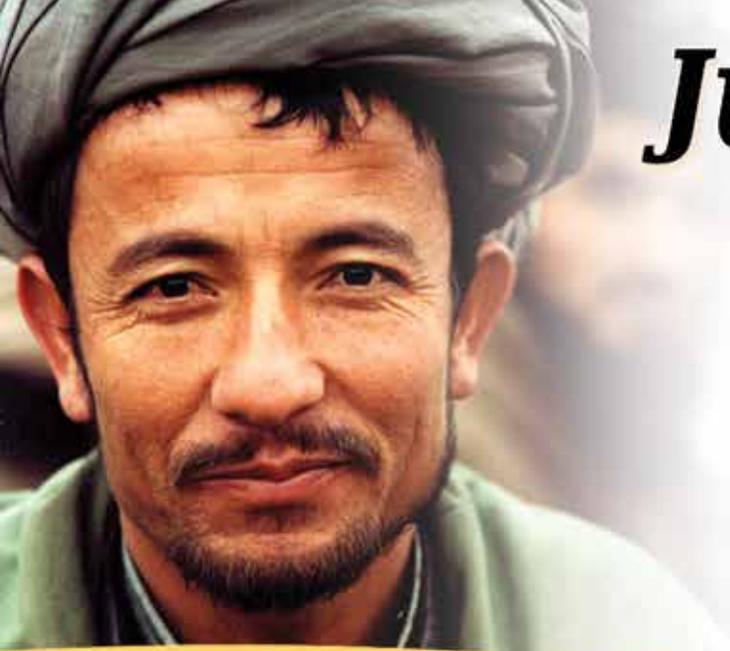
Why do we now observe the political Left and political Islam working together? Both feel they share the same enemy—Judeo-Christianity. The political left resents biblical moral values regarding sexuality, marriage, etc. Political Islam wants to rule the world and sees Christianity and its 2 billion adherents as an obstacle. If the political left can weaken Christianity by limiting the free speech of Christians and re-classifying it as hate speech, political Islam will not interfere. On the other hand, if political Islam can make gains against Christianity, the political left will not complain.

Furthermore, political Islam in the West has now entered into the political left's world of "intersectionality." This new term represents a principle in which all aggrieved groups share each other's struggles and take up those struggles through political activism. Intersectionality explains why prominent Muslim activist Linda Sarsour can state that she is an advocate of homosexual rights, even though homosexuals are to be executed under Islamic Law.¹⁰ The reality is both the political left and political Islam feel they can use the other to achieve their goals. The caveat to the political left is that political Islam has been around a lot longer and may not be so easy to tame.

What should be our response and prayer as Christians? As praying Christians, we should pray that freedom of religious speech will prevail. If current trends continue, witnessing to Muslims about Jesus may be restricted. Even academic inquiry about the history of Islam and the study of the life of Muhammad could be jeopardized or even illegal. As witnessing Christians, we should continue to utilize freedoms to share Christ with Muslims. Even if these freedoms are taken away, we must, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, obey God rather than men.

In conclusion, restrictions on religious speech hurt both Christians and Muslims. People who feel they may be helping Muslims by restricting speech that may even be offensive to some Muslims are not actually helping Muslims at all. Muslims, like Ahmed above, need vigorous discussions regarding the most important questions of life—spiritual questions. Though many Muslims come from lands where these types of discussions have not been encouraged, more Muslims than ever are probing for spiritual truth. Many are being convicted of sin by the Holy Spirit and becoming sons of the Heavenly Father through the shed blood of His Son! The Ahmeds and Fatimehs of this world continue to need our prayer and our witness to the truth of the gospel. Let us not shrink back in this amazing season of harvest.

¹ freespeechdebate.com/case/the-brandenburg-test-for-incitement-to-violence/
² obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/09/25/remarks-president-un-general-assembly
³ americanfreedomlawcenter.org/press-release/federal-government-authorizes-facebook-twitter-and-youtube-to-censor-anti-islam-speech-lawsuit-filed/
⁴ sunnah.com/bukhari/56/226
⁵ oecd.org/site/adboecdanti-corruptioninitiative/46816797.pdf
⁶ <http://www.newsweek.com/qa-pamela-geller-woman-isis-wants-dead-330244>
⁷ youtube.com/watch?v=ISNpOkpeWqg
⁸ wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamophobia
⁹ oxforddictionaries.com/definition/islamophobia
¹⁰ www.stepfeed.com/6-times-muslims-took-a-stand-for-the-lgbt-community-7702, which includes Linda Sarsour's statement: "[the] Same people who push anti-immigrant, anti-women, anti-LGBTQ bills r [are the] same people who push anti-Muslim bills."



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Friday, January 5, 2018. Please pray for

...*a prominent imam in the Arabian Peninsula* who is reading the Bible and, in his own words, “becoming more and more uncomfortable” with Islam.

...*new discipleship programs* being developed for Muslim Fulfulde speakers in Niger, Africa. Of Niger’s 21 million people, 94% are Muslims.

...*Amira, a Muslim lady in Europe* who is seeking truth in the Bible. Pray for the spiritual veil to be lifted from her eyes.

Friday, January 12, 2018. Please pray for

...*local authorities and citizens of Mosul, Iraq*. After years of ISIS occupation and fierce liberation battles, Mosul is devastated. Christians are hesitant to return.

...*the small number of Libyan believers from a Muslim background* to grow in faith and seek fellowship with others. Of Libya’s 6 million people, 96% are Muslims.

...*Evangelical churches in Malaysia*. A coalition of Islamic organizations proposed a ban on “evangelical” Christianity. Of Malaysia’s 31 million people, 56% are Muslims.

Friday, January 19, 2018. Please pray for

...*Christians in Egypt*. Following the rise in bomb attacks and kidnappings, anxiety fills their hearts. Of Egypt’s 95 million people, 87% are Muslims.

...*Umar, a young Turk who accepted Christ* after receiving a Bible from a stranger in the airport in Istanbul. He says “I am training to reach out to other Muslims.”

...*the “culture of fear” that pervades Islamic countries* and often paralyzes Muslims who desire to convert.

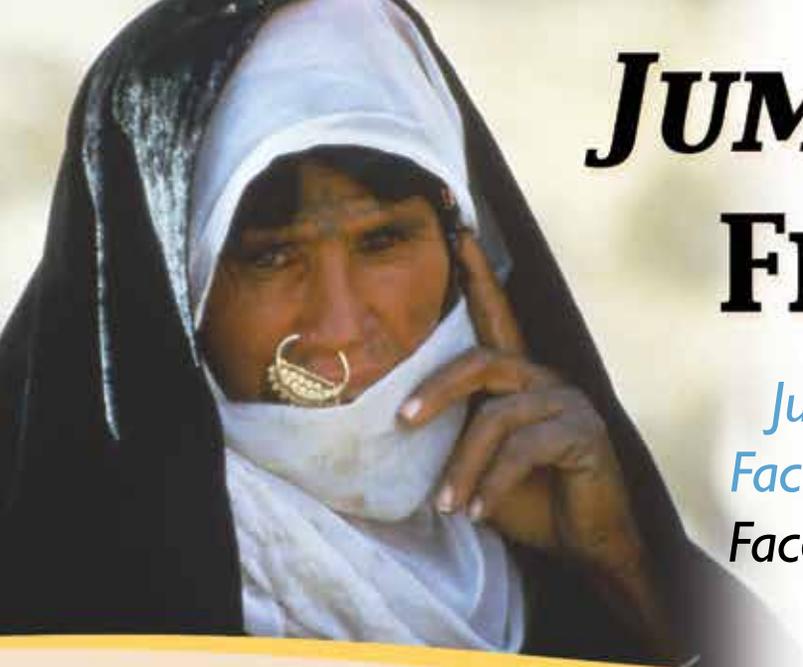
Friday, January 26, 2018. Please pray for

...*Christian believers in the Republic of Dagestan* in the Caucasus Region of Russia. Of Dagestan’s 3 million people, 83% are Muslims.

...*the physical and spiritual liberation of Muslim children* who suffer from sexual or physical abuse that is tolerated in many places in the Islamic world.

...*Neema in Yemen*. She has recently given her life to Christ and needs courage and protection. Of Yemen’s 28 million people, 99.6% are Muslims.

*I urge, then, first of all that requests, prayers, intercession and
thanksgiving be made for everyone. – 1 Timothy 2:1, NIV*



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Friday, February 2, 2018. Please pray for

...thousands of “diaspora” Eritreans, including Christians and Muslims, who have fled their communist country. Of Eritrea’s 5.4 million people, 53% are Muslims.

...protection and blessing on Afghan refugees in Europe who have chosen to leave Islam and follow Christ.

...Christians in Kazakhstan. Churches are sometimes raided by police and leaders arrested for meeting without prior registration. Of Kazakhstan’s 18 million people, 50.1% Muslims.

Friday, February 9, 2018. Please pray for

...brothers and sisters in Christ in Saudi Arabia. Most are expatriates, but a significant number of Saudis are secret believers. Of Saudi’s 32 million people, 91.7% are Muslims.

...Marawi City on the island of Mindanao in the southern Philippines. ISIS-linked groups have wreaked havoc there, including kidnapping Christians.

...prudent witnessing opportunities for Hisham, a former Muslim in a predominantly Muslim Middle Eastern country. He says “Jesus is just too good to be quiet about.”

Friday, February 16, 2018. Please pray for

...Zeinab, a former Muslim, and her family in Afghanistan. Zeinab and her entire family have become Christians. They are presently in a “safe house” in Afghanistan.

...a key pastor in Kyrgyzstan who is under surveillance because he leads a church of mostly Muslim-background believers. Of Kyrgyzstan’s 6 million people, 87% are Muslims.

...the rebuilding process of Christian communities and churches in both Syria and Iraq.

Friday, February 23, 2018. Please pray for

...a “church of converts from Islam and their children” in Morocco. Of Morocco’s 35 million people, 99.6% are Muslims.

...mature “disciplers” to nurture the growing harvest of Muslim refugees coming to Christ in Europe.

...the Bible ministry of Seema, a former Muslim lady. Due to a lack of Bibles in her Muslim country, she “wrote out the New Testament by hand, made copies and distributed them.”

**All personal names used herein are pseudonyms.*

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