

To help in Middle East: Encourage U.S. to advocate for values

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NORMAN, Okla. (ABP) — As the Middle East writhes in birth pains to deliver something yet undefined, a scholar who specializes in faith and global politics says Christians in America can support the progress toward freedom by encouraging their own government to speak boldly on behalf of the values that Arab populations are risking their lives to obtain.



Charles Kimball, author of "When Religion Becomes Evil," has long studied and written about the intersection of faith and politics.

Christians in America should push their representatives to advocate strongly for human rights and freedoms of conscience and expression, says Charles Kimball, who has counseled American presidents on Middle Eastern affairs since he negotiated with the Ayatollah Khomeini during the Iranian hostage crisis that started in November 1979. He said this is no time to support autocratic leaders whose continued reign might better serve America's pragmatic interests.

Christians in America are part of the global Church, "connected to Christians everywhere," said Kimball, presidential professor and director of religious studies at Oklahoma University. "We are part of the body of Christ that transcends national boundaries."

As part of a global fellowship, he said Christians should seek to know and

understand their brothers and sisters around the world, including the 15-17 million Arabic speaking Christians who need advocates in their drive for universally recognized human rights.

The U.S. government has a lot of influence when it tells the Egyptian government “Don’t even think of turning guns on these people,” Kimball said in a phone interview Feb. 22 from his office. “We ought to be telling our government to stand up for human rights, to stand up for universally recognized freedoms.”

“The more the U.S. lines up our behavior with our rhetoric the more we’ll see people from all over the world rushing to our side,” said Kimball, a graduate of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and former professor at Wake Forest and Furman universities.

Kimball, whose book *When Religion Becomes Evil* explores five signs that religion is going bad, says no one knows what form emerging Arab governance will take. Initial results might not be the precise form Americans prefer, but no one made the U.S. “boss of the world,” he said.

Kimball compared the situation to current economics, saying the world economy is in a place it’s never been and historical trends are no indication of the future in a fast changing world.

Watching people of similar language and nationality but of different faiths link arms to protect each other during dramatically different prayers “ought to make us doubly sensitive to the way we protect the rights of Muslims in the U.S.,” said Kimball.

Kimball, who has studied impact at the collision of religion and politics all of his career, which includes seven years as director of the Middle East office at the National Council of Churches, said the demonstrations and peoples’ revolt are “for the most part, not anchored in religious theology.”

Instead, it is young people who long for freedom from human rights abuses that most people cherish in western nations.

Against fears that antagonistic Islamic governments will arise from the rubble of failed Arab dictatorships, the large majority of demonstrators “were not there longing for some kind of Islamic state,” they were simply seeking “a real say in a governing structure,” Kimball said.

Many variables will determine what that final governing structure will be, including religion, but also the military, economics and models such as U.S. style democracy if the U.S. advocates for it - and models it.

“I’m very confident that over time democracy and freedom work and we have to be on the side of democracy and freedom,” said Kimball, who lived in Egypt 1977-78. “As we see in our own country, democracy can be very messy at times.”

“A new form of tyranny is not going to be accepted,” he said. “That’s really the dramatic news that’s coming out of all this. I think the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is getting the memo.”

“The genie is out of the bottle” feeding the hunger for democracy, Kimball said. Even in “the phony presidential election process” in Iran in 2009 the massive outpouring of voters proved the innate hunger for self-determination.

“There is a lot more hope for democracy, even in Iran, than people in the West give credit,” he said. “This is not a bottle you can cap back up very easily. We may see some things we don’t like in the short term, and there is a lot of frustration toward the U.S. because our behavior hasn’t been supportive and we’ve been sometimes standing with the wrong people.”

An American advantage and potential contribution to the Middle East as nations there struggle to define “what next” is that America has 300 years

of “working out how to live with diversity, pluralism and civility in a way most of the world hasn’t had to do but which is now having to do,” Kimball said.