



## News and Current Events :: Algerian Christians Gather for Worship Despite Order to Close Church Doors

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Algerian Christians Gather for Worship despite Order to Close Church Doors

By Aidan Clay

In late May, the president of the Protestant Church Association in Algeria (EPA) received the following notice: "I, Mr. Ben Amar Salma, the High Commissioner of the police in Bâjaja, have informed Mr. Mustapha Krim, the President of the EPA, to close down all worship places; the places which are used now and the places which are under construction. The authorities will make sure that the order will be obeyed, otherwise severe consequences and punishments will be applied."

This notification demanded the permanent closure of the seven Protestant churches in the Bâjaja province, located 200 kilometers east of the capital Algiers. The threat came as no surprise to the EPA. Since 2006, Protestants have lived at the mercy of a strict law known as Ordinance 06-03, which has prevented them from worshipping freely or legally.

The ordinance regulates the worship of non-Muslims by requiring churches to obtain government permission to hold services. Despite repeated efforts by the EPA to obtain this permission, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Religious Affairs have failed to create a clear procedure to register churches and it often takes years before a registration is approved.

"We were told we are not in compliance with the 2006 decree, but we have tried to comply," EPA President Mustapha Krim told the Algerian daily *La Dâpâche de Kabylie*. "We have spoken with the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Interior Ministry. We have gone round-and-round with them for years, but nothing gets done."

Similar notifications, like the one received in Bâjaja, have been issued to EPA churches before. "The same thing occurred in Tizi Ouzou when several churches were ordered to close under threats that legal action would be taken against the leaders," a Protestant church leader in Tizi Ouzou told ICC. "Our church also received this order in 2008, but because we resisted, the church continues to this day."

In a more recent incident, a church in the village of Makouda, near Tizi Ouzou, was given 48 hours to shut its doors on April 23. The pastor presented documents to the local police department that proved his affiliation with the EPA, but the police commissioner said the documents were not sufficient proof to operate the church. Still, the church continues to meet each week.

While EPA churches continue to hold services despite being warned otherwise, they do not take the threat on the Bâjaja churches lightly. "According to this decree, if one does not obey the instructions, the authorities are threatening to do the enforcement," said Krim. "Apparently they want us to disappear from the map."

Nonetheless, when Sunday morning services rolled around on May 29, the notification was not enough to persuade churches in Bâjaja to shut their doors. "Here we are Lord to praise Thy name!" sang a hundred worshippers before Pastor Nordin stepped to the pulpit to read Psalm 23, reminding the congregation of God's faithfulness even in hardship.

"We did not understand the decision of the , a church member told *La Dâpâche de Kabylie*. "We worship out of conviction. We are not afraid, because we did nothing wrong. We were never forced to choose Jesus, but we did so voluntarily. Whatever the circumstances, we will continue to say: we are here to praise your name Lord."

At the end of the day, authorities had not interfered and services proceeded as normal. Further indication that the situation was improving soon followed when Minister of Interior Dahou Ould Kablia stated at a June 2 press conference in Algiers that the Protestant Church of Béjaïa will be "allowed to continue their activities until they receive the necessary authorization," Algerian news agency Tout sur l'Algérie reported.

While Christians in Béjaïa remain unsure about whether or not they will be allowed to freely worship in the future, one thing is certain - they will not close quietly. "Pastors and church officials opted for resistance by continuing to worship instead of obeying the order to close their doors," said a representative of the EPA who has been closely involved in the case.

"They continued to meet and celebrate their religion despite the threats. If the authorities decide to close places of worship, Christians will gather in homes or cell group meeting in the open air, which is already being done in some communities. But, we believe the situation will improve."

#### Remember Algeria in Prayer

The inability to register church buildings have caused many Algerian Christian communities to worship underground, either in the homes of congregants or in the secluded countryside. One community living in a remote village nestled in the beautiful Kabylie mountainside was gathering in a garage, their third location that year, when I visited them in 2010. They were preparing to move again because the landlord had received complaints from neighbors that Christian worship should not be overheard in a Muslim community. Before designating the garage as a house of worship, the congregants held gatherings near a river on the outskirts of town each week when the weather permitted. Please keep this congregation, the churches in Béjaïa, and the EPA in your prayers.

#### Algerian Christian Sentenced Beyond Prosecutor's Request

Five-year prison term handed down for "insulting" Muhammad despite lack of evidence.

By Damaris Kremida

Convicting a Christian convert for insulting the prophet of Islam, a judge in Algeria stunned the Christian community by sentencing him beyond what a prosecutor recommended.

In Oran, 470 kilometers (292 miles) west of Algiers, a criminal court in the city's Djamel district on Wednesday (May 25) sentenced Siaghi Krimo to a prison term of five years for giving a CD about Christianity to a neighbor who subsequently claimed he had insulted Muhammad. Krimo was also fined 200,000 Algerian dinars (US\$2,760), according to Algerian news reports.

The prosecutor had reportedly requested the judge sentence him to a two-year prison sentence and a fine of 50,000 Algerian dinars (US\$690).

The court tried Krimo based solely on the complaint filed by his neighbor, who accused him of attempting to convert him to Christianity.

"He gave a CD to a neighbor, and for that he has to spend five years in prison," said the president of the Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA), Mustapha Krim, trying to contain his disbelief. "The hearing went well, and the lawyer defended well, yet in the end the judge gave him the maximum punishment."

Authorities arrested Krimo on April 14 and held him in jail for three days. On May 4 he appeared before the court in Djamel, where the prosecutor requested the two-year sentence in the absence of the neighbor who had accused him – the only witness – and any evidence.

The punishment the prosecutor requested is the minimum for Algerians found guilty of insulting Muhammad or "the messengers of God" or anyone who "denigrates the dogma or precepts of Islam, be it via writings, drawings, statements or any other means," according to Article 144 of the Algerian Penal Code.

Krim said that if the courts start interpreting the law as it did in Krimo's case, then the future of Algeria's Christians is grim.

"If they start applying the law like that, it means there is no respect for Christianity," Krim said, "and pretty soon all the Christians of Algeria will find themselves in prison. If the simple fact of giving a CD to your neighbor costs five years in prison, this is catastrophic."

Defense lawyer Mohamed Ben Belkacem told Compass that the judge's verdict was unexpected and heavy, indicating the legal system's prejudice against Christians.

"We did not expect this verdict at all," Ben Belkacem said. "It was a heavy sentence. The judge punished the Christian, not the accused." There was no proof, and despite that, the court granted him no extenuating circumstances.

The lawyer said he plans to appeal the case. Krimo is not required to serve his prison sentence until the court hears his appeal and upholds the conviction.

"My client denied having insulted the prophet, and there is no material proof that supports this accusation," Ben Belkacem told Compass before the May 25 hearing, "but these types of cases are full of unexpected, last-minute developments, so it is difficult for me to envision the outcome."

At the time of his arrest, authorities detained another Christian convert along with Krimo but released him the same day. Authorities first took Krimo to his house, which they ransacked, confiscating his Bible, CDs, computer and flash discs, according to sources. His wife was able to retrieve the items the next day.

Krimo had "good contact" with his neighbors and sometimes answered questions about Christianity, according to sources. Krimo and his wife have a baby daughter.

The court delivered its verdict the same week that the governor of the province of Bejaia ordered the closing of seven Protestant churches.

Asked if he thought the court had instructions from higher officials to hand down such heavy punishment to Krimo, Krim responded with no hesitation: "It's certain!"

#### Churches Still Meet in Bejaia

Over the weekend (May 27-29) authorities did not interfere with the scheduled worship meetings in the district of Bejaia, despite the governor's order for all the churches of the area to close and threats that police could use force.

"The services proceeded normally, with no police intervention," said Krim. "So we are continuing and waiting to see if they decide to act otherwise."

On May 22 the governor of Bejaia sent a statement to Krim informing him that all churches in the province were illegal because they were unregistered. Registration is required under controversial Ordinance 06-03, but Christians report the government refuses to respond to or grant their applications for registration.

"I know about the closure of all the Christian gatherings of the EPA in Bejaia," Ben Belkacem said. "It's an illegal and arbitrary decision on the part of the governor of Bejaia."

According to a report from Christian support organization Open Doors, on April 23 authorities cited Ordinance 06-03 to order a pastor in Maakouda, a city near Tizi Ouzou, to close down his church within 48 hours. When the pastor refused, authorities called him to the police station, where he presented documentation of his affiliation with the EPA.

The police commissioner claimed it was not legal proof of authorization to operate the church. Compass has learned that the issue has not been resolved, but that Christians there continue to meet.

The controversial law was introduced in 2006 to regulate non-Muslim worship. In 2008 the government applied measures in accordance with Ordinance 06-03 to limit the activities of non-Muslim groups, ordering the closure of 26 churches in the Kabylie region because they were not registered.

EPA members argue, however, that the law is impossible to implement as officials refuse to register their churches despite efforts to comply. They said the authorities only use the law to harass churches.

“It is clear that there is discrimination,” Ben Belkacem said. “Christians are seen negatively by the political system of Algeria, and the judiciary is but an instrument of the system.”

Despite efforts to comply with the ordinance, no Protestant churches or groups have received official approval to operate, and the government has not established administrative means to implement the ordinance, according to the U.S. Department of State’s 2010 Report on International Religious Freedom.

Though no churches have closed since 2008, their status remains questionable and only valid through registration with the EPA.

“Christians live in a very difficult situation in Algeria,” Ben Belkacem said. “They are just tolerated for the sake of foreign politics and in reality have no liberty to worship, since no association is recognized despite the many efforts taken.”

There are more than 99,000 Christians in Algeria, less than 0.3 percent of the total population of 35.4 million people, according to Operation World. Muslims make up more than 97 percent of the population.

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Home base, Linköping, Sweden:

I have read through prayer diaries for the first 10 of our 30 years in prayer ministry, to help focusing for the future. The prophetic dimension is clearly discerned to be a distinct feature from the very beginning. We were also engaged for the intercession for nations during the initial stages – and have continued to be involved in efforts of this category during all these years.

As we look forward, we are invited to take part in prayer warfare with churches at their particular Ground Zero – at the point of defeat and bitterness, at the point where the enemy celebrates his victories. We are also enrolled to engage in the building of house churches as points of beginning where the testimony has been reduced to rubble. Our own Ground Zero, in our own city, is a major target in this effort. The concept of the Solemn Assembly will become a major tool in these efforts. The revival at hand will find an open door where the Church gathers for extra-ordinary prayer according to 1 Tim 2:8.

Please, cover our efforts in prayer – may efforts of this kind become our common efforts. Watch in prayer for your own Ground Zero and wait for the Lord to guide you to engage in prayer and prayer warfare for his cities, his people and his nations.

Lars W.

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There I will meet with you  
Ex 29:42-43