

AL - MUNTADA

The Middle East Council of Churches

July 2020



**Palestine and the Palestinians' Right of Return: A Legitimate Cause
"The Flower of Cities" is Ours**



**Reverend
Dr. Habib Badr:**

Does Jesus
really not care
that we are
perishing?



**Philippe
Lazzarini:**

Palestine refugees
deserve a just
and lasting solution
to their plight

**"COVID-19" - The Story of a Virus
that Turned Houses into Prayer Altars**

LETTER OF THE PRESIDENT

The President of the National Evangelical Union in Lebanon, and the President of the Council on behalf of the Evangelical family.

REV. DR. HABIB BADR

Does Jesus really not care that we are perishing?

*They woke him and said to him: Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?
(Mark 4:38)*



Usually, when a great windstorm arises on a boat in the middle of the sea, as happened with Jesus and his disciples according to the Gospel of Mark, each of the passengers takes a bucket and tries to empty the ship from water to avoid drowning... or at least delay the catastrophe.. hoping that the wind subsides in time. This is exactly what the world is trying to do today by fighting the coronavirus pandemic that took us all by surprise just like a violent storm that blew over, affecting everyone and destroying everything on its path. Scientists and medical professionals around the world are trying to delay the spread of this dangerous pandemic in the hope of discovering a treatment or vaccine before it is too late.

According to Mark the Evangelist, one passenger on the boat did not rush to help the others fight the storm: This passenger is Jesus himself who apparently stayed asleep in the stern of the boat, as if at this decisive moment, He had abandoned his followers.

This is exactly what Matthew's mother felt... I clearly saw it in her eyes while watching the video that one of my colleagues from London had sent me; a video showing a faithful mother crying while holding her young son Mathew who was wrestling with death after having contracted the coronavirus. I heard this mother cry her heart out and ask bitterly: "Where is Jesus? Why doesn't He come to heal my son? Is He asleep...does He even hear our prayers? ... I feel that He does not care at all ... He left my faithful son in unbearable pain, fading away before my eyes." The cry of that bereaved mother broke my heart and reminded me of the cry of Jesus' disciples when they found Him asleep during the storm, so they woke Him up and said to Him: "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing??" "We are about to drown while you are asleep ... Get up and do something!"

Based on the Gospel, Jesus woke up and silenced the sea, the wind ceased, and there was great calm... Then, He rebuked his disciples saying,

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“Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?”. Jesus asked them this question to remind them of the faith they had inherited from their fathers and grandfathers ... The same faith revealed in the Old Testament scriptures and the Psalms teaching them to go by these verses: “The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I lack” and that “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom should I fear?”

These verses like many other urge believers to give up on fear and fully rely on God.

Jesus is asking His disciples and Matthew’s mother not to be afraid and to rely on God at all times and in all circumstances, especially during periods of great danger and difficulties, such as the period we are now going through due to the coronavirus pandemic.

After Jesus scolded His disciples for their lack of faith, He calmed the wind and solved the whole problem. “They were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, whom even wind and sea obey?”

“Who then is this?” ... It is the greatest and most important question that any person in the world could ask at any time in history ... especially during these difficult times. Who is Jesus Christ? Who is this person that silenced the wind and calmed the sea? Who is He who alone can end the coronavirus

pandemic? ... only if He wants to ... and why does He seem asleep?

He is Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary, anointed by God ... He is the only son of God ...who we believe in and acknowledge as codified in the Nicene Creed.

Whenever He seems asleep, absent, silent, or like He does not care that we are perishing ... whether in these difficult times of Coronavirus, or at any point in the history of mankind ... Jesus, the one and only, is never tired .. He never sleeps ... nor neglects us ... Even if we think so.

He is our God, our protector, and our Savior ... We rely only on Him in every circumstance, place and time.

As Matthew's mother who was aching, and as the disciples who were fighting the storm, we may feel sometimes that He does not care about us.

But at a particular moment that He only chooses, He intervenes and saves us in His own special way... which we may not like sometimes, and which may surprise us and surprise others who believe in His name.

Let us then turn all our concerns and worries over to God, trust in His steadfast love and tirelessly wait for Him to come, at any moment, as He is always near. ■

FOREWORD BY THE MECC SECRETARY GENERAL



Has Jerusalem city of Peace and prayer been sold for thirty pieces of silver?

How can rulers of our era buy and sell land, history and sanctities that do not belong to them?

How can the vendor sell what he does not own, what it does not belong to him and how can the purchaser dare to buy what is not for sale?

Can peace be bought with oppression and power and be still called peace? Has this become a new pretext for more meddling, war and destruction? How can the world remain apathetic and silent and unethically pledge allegiance?

Has Jerusalem really been sold for thirty pieces of silver?

O Jerusalem city of prayer! Even if the “deal” is closed, you will kneel only to pray and will bow down only to your Master, the Creator! Your secret is great, glorious city, O city of Mysteries. All peoples come to you, find sanctuary in you and worship God in your temples.

Even more, in you Jerusalem, The Lord Jesus Christ gave himself as sacrifice for men. In His death, he defeated death and demonstrated his Divinity, which was only Love.

In You Jerusalem, life and love triumphed over all forms of death and hatred and the covenant between God and human beings was renewed.

We truly believe that even if you suffer, you will rise

again victorious and remain the city of Peace forever.

You will never be a bolted city for a people of one color, one religion, and one race, as this means the death of your spiritual identity and the decease of your universal message. Jesus, in His death defeated death. You too Jerusalem, will rise again and be the city of Humanity and Divinity!

Your doors will be opened even wider and your luminous temples will receive the pilgrims coming from around the world to you Jerusalem to pray for God and to meet the “other” in brotherhood.

The Middle East Council of Churches since its inception in 1974 has not relented in advocating for your cause and defending your sanctities. Today at this historic moment, the Council's member churches pledge before God to stand with your people for you to remain the city of Peace and Prayer, according to the will of God Almighty!

In this issue of Al - Muntada magazine, we send this special message of love and solidarity to you, hoping that peoples of the world will return to you as pilgrims, to be blessed by your spirit and that just peace will reign in your land and throughout the world. ■

MECC Secretary General

Dr Souaraya Bechealany

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The MECC members of the Executive Committee Meeting from Cyprus: We call on Christians in this blessed Middle East to hold on to their lands, their heritage and their identity

Over the course of two days (January 21 – 22/2020), the Executive Committee held its regular meeting in Larnaca – Cyprus. The meeting was generously hosted by His Beatitude Chrysostomos II, Archbishop of Nova Justiniana and All Cyprus of the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus. The members of the Executive Committee who participated in the meeting came from Cyprus, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine.

The meeting was presided over by the presidents of the Council from the four ecclesiastical families: His Beatitude Youhanna X - Patriarch of Antioch and All the East for the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and president of the Council for the Greek Orthodox Family, by His Holiness Mor Ignatius

Aphrem II - Patriarch of Antioch and All the East and Supreme Head of the Universal Syriac Orthodox Church who is the president of the Council for the Eastern Orthodox Family, by His Beatitude Mar Louis Raphael Sako – Patriarch of Babylon for Chaldeans and president of the Council for the Catholic family, and by Right Rev. Dr. Habib Badr, president of the National Evangelical Union Lebanon and president of the Council for the Evangelical Family.

In the final statement of the meeting, the participants declared the following: "In the midst of a period full of painful events and suffering plaguing our Middle Eastern countries, the Executive Committee members are fully aware of the suffering, afflictions and challenges faced by the people in the region





as well as by churches. They contemplated the divine affection of Our Lord Jesus Christ and His unparalleled love for humanity. They call on Christian believers in the Middle East to hold on to their faith and hope and believe that God is among us, supports us and engages us in His divine life. They also urge the member churches of the Council to be fully present next to every refugee and displaced person who is in pain after losing his family, friends or properties due to violence and war so that the churches remain an icon of divine affection and spaciousness.

The first day discussions tackled many topics such as spiritual renewal, ecumenical-geopolitical challenges and interfaith dialogue as well as the institutional development of the MECC and its empowerment after the crisis that it had been through. This will lead to the development of its strategic orientation in preparation of the 12th General Assembly. On the second day, the participants discussed the report of Dr. Souraya Bechealany, the Secretary General, that includes the Council's achievements during 2019 and its future prospects. They also examined the

annual reports of the departments as well as the financial report."

At the end, based on the discussions mainly focusing on the challenges faced by Christians in the Middle East and their partners in citizenship, the Executive Committee stressed the following:

- 1- Promote the ecumenical cooperation between the Middle East churches on theological, social services and media levels in order to confirm their choice of unity in the witness of Jesus Christ who has risen.
- 2- Pray for the discovery of the fate of their Eminences Archbishop Boulous Yazigi and Archbishop Youhanna Ibrahim who were kidnapped in April 2013, and request the international conscience to work for their safe return and to allow them to continue their mission which is focused on peace building and human dignity.
- 3- The escalation of tension in the Middle East and the Arab World requires prayer and work for peace and new initiatives to counter waves

of extremism in order to preserve peace in the society, protect human dignity and pave the way for wise dialogue and conflict resolution while rejecting violence and war.

- 4- The popular movement that Iraq is witnessing, calls for an active contribution to achieve social justice, economic integrity, good governance, national sovereignty and entrench the principles of accountability and the fight against corruption through a fair judiciary system.
- 5- The exacerbation of the Syrian people's suffering requires the deployment of intensive efforts in all sectors to lift the embargo, promote the path of peace building and the restoration of security, and to work hard to ensure the appropriate conditions that will allow the return of refugees and displaced people to their land.
- 6- Recognize the efforts of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan that has been entrusted with the protection of Christian and Muslim sacred sites in the holy city of Jerusalem as well as the strengthening of Christian presence while cooperating with churches. In addition to that,

the Kingdom has been working for the promotion of Christian-Muslim dialogue and living together in citizenship.

- 7- The participants pray for Lebanon that is witnessing mass protests carried out by the Lebanese people demanding a decent living and the good management of their common resources; so that Lebanon, the "Message", regains its cultural role as a model of pluralism for common good and as an example of responsible freedom.
- 8- Support all efforts to restore the unity of Cyprus in order to unify the Cypriot people, promote regional and international peace, and put an end to the occupation that has caused the division of the island.
- 9- Continuously support churches in Palestine and recognize the people's resilience despite their suffering in the face of occupation, segregation and colonization. Call for the respect of the freedom of religion for all Palestinians including Christians and Muslims, and the respect of the legal and historic status-quo regarding the fact that East Jerusalem is the capital of a viable independent Palestinian state.
- 10- The Egyptian people have always aspired to consolidate the path of citizenship, free from extremism and isolation. They are coexisting to promote the living together which leads us to confirm that they are collectively aware of the positive consequences that it stores in their country.
- 11- The fact that people in the region are calling for a complete citizenship, which is based on equal rights and duties and embraces diversity, requires a review of the systems and laws. This proves that there is an urgent need to formulate a path which emphasizes on understanding



unity in diversity while considering that diversity is richness, away from sectarian and factional exhortations and all forms of intolerance.

- 12- The poverty and the marginalization that some classes of society in the region suffer from call all states and ecclesial institutions to design developmental sustainable policies that ensure a decent life for every human being and that contribute to social justice and economic prosperity.
- 13- The MECC calls on Christians in this blessed Middle East to hold on to their lands, their heritage and their identity with faith and hope, and to enhance their role in consolidating living together, mutual respect and social solidarity.
- 14- The ongoing refugee and displacement crisis require intensive efforts from the international community especially the United Nations and faith-based organizations, to facilitate the return of these refugees and displaced people to their countries of origin while offering them a decent life and protecting their identity and civilization. This situation also requires providing constant support for host communities and ensuring resilience components as well as the protection of refugees and displaced people until their safe return.
- 15- Ensure active coordination and communication in

preparation of the General Assembly of the Middle East Council of Churches that is expected to be held between the 16th and 19th of September 2020 in Lebanon. It will be entitled "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." (Matthew 14:27) and will be generously hosted by His Beatitude Cardinal Mar Bechara Boutros Al-Rai - Maronite Patriarch of Antioch and all the East - in Bkerki.

In conclusion, the MECC Executive Committee members thanked His Beatitude Chrysostomos II and the Greek Orthodox Church in Cyprus for generously hosting this meeting and thanked the Lord Jesus Christ, that gathers His Church through His love. The MECC Executive Committee members are confident that the churches of the Middle East were not and will never be alone in their witness, while renewing their faith in the promise of God "I am with you always, until the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20). They also believe that the path towards the 12th General Assembly will embody the common witness of the churches and will shed light from a realistic and prophetic perspective, on the role of Christians in the suffering Middle East especially in the fight for human dignity. This requires a solid cooperation between leaders to guarantee a bright future suitable for the Middle East and its value, where diversity is a model for living together. ■

FEATURE FILE

Palestine and the Palestinians' Right of Return: A Legitimate Cause "The Flower of Cities" is Ours



The Nakba, the Refugee Crisis, the Right of Return, Settlement, Normalization, the so-called "Deal of the Century", the Israeli Annexation Plan, the usurpation of the cradle and land of Sacrifice and Sanctity, are nothing but a few instances of horrible ongoing crimes being conducted by Israel against Palestinians, over the course of 62 years. Since the Nakba, a relationship based on solidarity and service was established between the wounded Palestinian people and the Churches of the Middle East. Consequently, and in the midst of an ill-fated region, plagued by perpetual wars and absurd conflicts but desperately longing for a bold prophetic voice, the Middle East Council of Churches has not relented in affirming on every platform in the world, that the Palestinian cause is legitimate, stressing that it is unacceptable to address this

issue with bargains and swaps. This immoral approach has been adopted for decades in order to liquidate the Palestinian cause and delegitimize the fight of the Palestinian people who have been demanding for decades, to establish their state with its capital East Jerusalem, and for the guaranteed right of return for Palestinian refugees in the diaspora. The time has come to achieve a peace based on justice, and since the Middle Council of East Churches has never ceased to support the fight of the Palestinian people, this issue of the "Al-Muntada" magazine is dedicated to highlighting the history and role of the Department of Service for Palestinian Refugees (DSPR). In this issue, MECC insisted on raising its voice, calling the international community to act conscientiously, put an end to this injustice, and return the "Flower of all cities" to its legitimate owners.

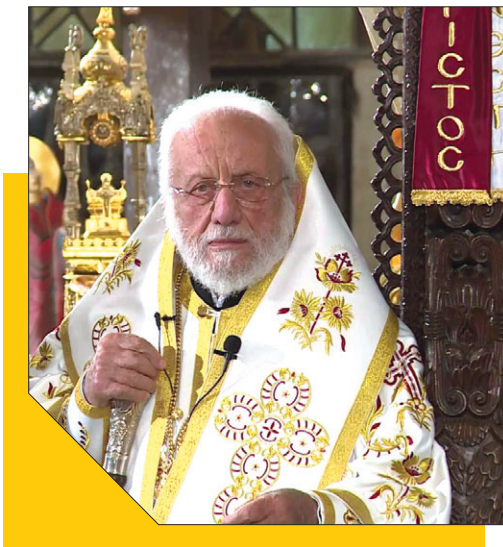
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PALESTINE AND THE PALESTINIANS' RIGHT OF RETURN: A LEGITIMATE CAUSE

The Man of Al Quds

METROPOLITAN GEORGE KHODR

from the book "Sunday's Stands" - Dar An-Nahar publishing, Tuesday, April 13, 1971



The Al-Muntada magazine has the honor to republish an impressive article written by HE Bishop George Khodr, forty-nine years ago. This work of art that stands out due to its incomparable theological, anthropological and cultural depth, revolves around the suffering of the city of Jerusalem and more specifically, the Man of al-Quds. Between the lines, this article carries an ecumenical approach which calls us to meditate and inspires us to persevere in our fight for Truth and Justice.

Al Quds has made it to the Vatican's heart. The Pope has said "yes" to his Christ, to the Christ whom the Jews are nailing to the body of Palestine. This time, the cross is made of flesh. We, the Eastern Christians, bid thanks to the bishop of the West, to the conscience that is awakening due to prayer and fear, in the hope of Christ's sovereignty over stone, over the dust of the city. The Vatican has said "no" to tyranny and, for that reason, this "no" has meant a "yes" to his Lord. It matters to us all that Rome weeps with Jerusalem, for in her tears, she is baptized, and in her sorrow we are purified.

Israel has not allowed the Pope to admit the tragedy, for only she is entitled to write lamentations. The prophets wail over her own Jerusalem. That is why I agonized when an elder, who is not one of

her own, exclaimed that the Christian landmarks of Al Quds are disappearing. She, who makes the West cry for her humiliation, roars like a lion, descending into the alleys because the shepherd, kneeling on the Vatican Hill, scrupled and worried about the fate of Christianity in the East. She, who is feigning humility, was disconcerted because a great hierarch has feared that brethren of his be humiliated in their sanctuaries. And Paul VI, who, together with Athenagoras, was blessed on this land, knows what the transfigurations of Palestine mean to us and knows that our Eastern Christianity loves the symbol, adheres to the shrines of remembrance and worships in the places of the miracle because, retracing the remembrance, she lives by it and celebrates in a ceremonial glory and, when she prays, she is

truly in a perpetual ecstasy. Moreover, the believer we have is in need of a procession in between hermitages, to get blessed by humbling himself at the feet of the saints and to ascend, starting with that God who incarnated in Nazareth, was born in Bethlehem, resurrected in Jerusalem and from there to the ends of the earth.

Today, this Christ is translated to us as an earthly Christ. Today, Christ manifests Himself to us as a tormented Palestine. Our Holy Places are a foothold to this Palestine. Indeed, places are sanctified because the Lord has touched them with mercy. They are, in their own right, endless outbursts, a hope of return, and aspirations for eternity. Their stone is a meaning by itself. Therefore, those who still have some self-respect are shuddering over Israel's building cabarets in the vicinity of the places of worship. Thus, holy and unholy places will become the same, profaned by the tourist since, in his eyes, they are transforming into museums. He wanders between them and the night club. And thus the talking stone turns into a barren stone.

"From this desecrated human wreck, do you want the warmth of spring and the joy of a young lamb in the morning"?

The papacy has gone beyond the obsession of "sacred places" to being preoccupied with people. The issue did not remain one of merely saving the Savior's Sepulcher. This time we want this to be a crusade of conscience and of a soul that is set ablaze with zeal for the people who live around the holy sites. That is why the Pope has said that the holy places have unique requirements and that the Christians must continue to exist in this country. The "Osservatore Romano" did not fail to

heed Jews and Muslims, since it stated, one week after his Holiness' discourse, that the faithful from the three monotheistic religions should find their identity in this Jerusalem entity and that it feared the impossibility of any political agreement if the minorities were not protected, for "their existence and development are threatened by a policy which seems to aim at the slow suffocation" of the non-Jews (March 22 and 23). The article did not present utopian wishes since it is based on numbers and deals with appropriation decisions according to which Arab homes get destroyed and Arabs get crammed into narrowing areas until they leave. In addition to the growing Jewish settlement, this comes to fulfill the design of the unified Greater Jerusalem.

The image of Jerusalem established itself in the mind of Paul VI, and he saw her crucified when he contemplated the Crucified on Great and Holy Friday. He bid her children warm greetings, and expressed to them, in the name of all Christians, both sympathy and goodwill. He did not greet the pilgrimage sites, but the faithful who receive, in peace and love, those who come to them from the ends of the world.

The devout Jew can understand that we do not make a pilgrimage to the house but rather to the Lord of the House, as Rabi'a says. In the rituals of the servants, it is to God that we go, whereupon we meet those who are purified, coming from everywhere; by those, we mean the adherents to this land; for the worshiper matters more than the house of worship. It has been so good for us, on Pascha, to see the light of the Lord drawn on the faces of the multitudes who surrendered to this light. Therefore, the Jews' argument that they are securing the passage to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Al-Aqsa Mosque is

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PALESTINE AND THE PALESTINIANS' RIGHT OF RETURN: A LEGITIMATE CAUSE

inadmissible. This is not our concern. Our concern is to stand together before God with the children of both religions, the followers of which Israel is seeking to expel from the land. It remains that, for us, Jerusalem is not the end of the journey. For quite some time, Israel, in New York, as well as its radio in Tel Aviv, has been launching an attack against Arab Christians, as if they wanted them to be an absurd echo for some types of Judaized Christianity in the West. Arab Christianity, and the Eastern Christianity in general, is becoming a thorn in the eye of Israel because it proves that Christianity is not founded merely by pilgrims coming from the West, and that there is a myth saying that Palestine is an

arid wasteland not because of Muslims alone, but also because of Arab Christians. Man is the ultimate end. We Christians are not minorities. We have assumed Arab insurgency against the tyrants. We are driving Zionism to trial, not only because Christian landmarks are being wiped out in Palestine. We filed the lawsuit because the occupation is annihilating manhood. We are not saying "no" to the occupation, just because it said "no" to the Nazarene. We are rejecting whoever rejects the human being everywhere. The reality of the Man of Al Quds is calling for help. I wish that all of humanity cries out so that the prostitutes would not be considered virgins, and the executioner a victim. ■

Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA).

PHILIPPE LAZZARINI:

Palestine refugees deserve a just and lasting solution to their plight, but UNRWA is not the party that suggests such a solution

Interviewed by Huguette Salameh



What is the role of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and what are the challenges that it faces to at least secure the minimum standards of living for Palestinian refugees who are tirelessly waiting for a final solution to their plight for them to be able to return to their stolen land? Mr. Philippe Lazzarini, Commissioner-General of UNRWA, answered all these questions in this special interview.

What are the primary roles that UNRWA plays to respond to the needs of Palestine refugees, especially at the socio-economic level?

We are committed to fostering the human development of Palestinian refugees by helping them to:

- Acquire knowledge and skills- mostly by being students in our schools and our Technical and Vocational Training Centers
- Lead long and healthy lives- mostly by providing full comprehensive primary healthcare and related health services at our health centers.
- Either achieve decent standards of living by supporting the most vulnerable (food or cash assistance) or by helping entrepreneurs amongst them start small businesses through our microfinance loans.

- Enjoy human rights to the fullest possible extent- by UNRWA constantly protecting, promoting and advocating for Palestine refugee rights under international law as stipulated by its mandate.

In the absence of a political solution that enables Palestinian refugees to return to their homes on the basis of General Assembly resolution 194, what are the challenges faced by UNRWA, other than the challenge of securing funding?

Palestine refugees deserve a just and lasting solution to their plight, but UNRWA is not the party that suggests such a solution or advocates for it. UNRWA is mandated by the international community to ensure that, until such a solution is reached, Palestinian refugees get adequate support to develop to their full potential, live in dignity and

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acquire the skills that they need. We are an Agency that services a community of Palestine refugees scattered across the Middle East (West Bank, including East Jerusalem, Gaza, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria) in a quasi-state-like way, from providing education to 530,000 Palestine refugees kids and health services to support the most vulnerable through our social services. All this at a very cost-efficient annual budget of 1.4 billion USD, where our own staff delivers core the services directly. Our most pressing issue is to make sure that the overwhelming political support UNRWA received at the UN General Assembly mandate renewal vote, last time in December 2019, (when almost all UN member-states voted to renew its mandate) continues and translates into financial support. We are humbled by the confidence that the world has placed in us, but we need financial resources to implement our mandate.

parties and international community to resolve the broader question of Palestine since 1948, including the situation of refugees, not the existence or action of humanitarian organizations.

What are the foundations of the relationship between UNRWA and host countries?

UNRWA is an agency of the United Nations that operates in host countries that are themselves UN member-states. UNRWA provides protection and services to Palestine refugees as per its mandate, and has an agreement with each host state. As such, UNRWA provides all the basic services to the Palestine refugees who live in that place (Lebanon, Jordan etc...). As any UN agency, UNRWA respects national laws but enjoys the privileges and immunities afforded to it (mostly related to the protection of its staff and premises) under international law.



WE HAVE BEEN FACING INCREASING ATTACKS ON OUR LEGITIMACY, WHILST WE ARE A UN AGENCY THAT IS BOUND BY THE HIGHEST ETHICAL AND PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS



We have been facing increasing attacks on our legitimacy, whilst we are a UN agency that is bound by the highest ethical and professional standards. We have faced questioning over the definition of a Palestinian refugee, mostly related to whether the children of refugees are refugees. UNRWA does not apply a unique standard to refugees in registering descendants - the children of all refugees are refugees, not just the children of Palestinian refugees! Let me be very clear, Palestinian refugees exist today because of the continued inability of the

How can one examine and define the complementarity between relief work and humanitarian intervention, and the developmental approach adopted by the agency to deal with Palestinian refugee communities?

UNRWA was founded (and is still is) as a humanitarian agency in 1949, with a strong part of its mandate related to the human development of Palestinian refugees. So while the Agency steps up with its humanitarian operations in times of conflicts (Gaza or Syria for example), it works on the longer term positive



impact it fosters with Palestinian refugees: health and education are the foundations of the development work that UNRWA does. While humanitarian action is often the response to an emergency situation, UNRWA works on both levels, humanitarian and development, especially as the situation of Palestine refugees has sadly not been resolved in 70 years. It is our long term commitment to the wellbeing and the development of the Palestinian refugee communities that has allowed over 2.5 million children to graduate from our schools and that has allowed us to greatly contribute to the health of our communities (whether it's non-communicable diseases, mother and child health, vaccines and our support to the secondary and tertiary health care including hospitalization when needed).

Do you think that the Palestinian national identity of refugees will persist despite the passage of time? According to you, what will the next phase entail?

I am not in a position to speculate even though we at UNRWA very closely monitor the developments around us, as we operate in a highly politically charged environment, and are affected by it. This region is very volatile, with recurrent crises and unsettled conflicts. For example, now there is

talk about a possible annexation of (parts of) the West Bank. We monitor this closely because an annexation will have an impact on Palestinian refugees who live in the West Bank and on their living conditions. There is an acute financial crisis in Lebanon that has dealt a heavy blow to Palestinian refugees, a very vulnerable community in Lebanon. We are doing what we can to support them, but in Lebanon, it's a crisis within a crisis: UNRWA's financial crisis within Lebanon's financial crisis. Syria: nearly 10 years of war and more than half the Palestine refugees in Syria displaced at least once, if not more, with many of their original places of residence destroyed. Gaza: nearly 14 years of blockage has all but crippled the economy. Every place we work in has its own political challenges, our role is to keep Palestinian refugees hopeful because they know that we are there for them, until there is a solution that puts an end to their plight.

For a long time now, we have been following news about the obligation to end the work of UNRWA which means revoking the Palestinian refugees' right of return. What do you think about that?

To start with, the two issues are not connected. The right of return comes from the United Nations General Assembly (resolution 194), while the existence and

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THE CHURCH AT THE SERVICE OF THE HUMANITARIAN

mandate of UNRWA comes from another set of resolutions. Even if UNRWA ceased to exist (which isn't about to happen, in the absence of durable solutions, after the huge vote of confidence we got last December), how does that take away from the rights of Palestinian refugees as set under international law and under UN GA resolutions? Abolishing a UN entity won't abolish and solve the Palestinian refugee status.

to keep the Palestinian refugee issue as a priority and a rightful cause?

UNRWA cooperates with some segments of civil society in different areas, and that is a cooperation that we are very proud of and hope to develop further. Those who believe in the same principles should join forces to advocate for these principles. I believe there is room to increase our cooperation



WE OPERATE IN A QUASI-STATE-LIKE WAY, FROM PROVIDING EDUCATION TO 530,000 PALESTINE REFUGEES KIDS AND HEALTH SERVICES TO SUPPORTING THE MOST VULNERABLE



How do you describe the relationship between the Agency and civil society organizations, especially concerning the coordination of efforts? And what about the Agency's relationship with religious authorities and faith-based organizations (FBOs)? How does UNRWA cooperate with them in order

with credible and principled segments of civil society, including FBOs, which have huge traction and an ability to clarify many myths and promote tolerance and acceptance, particularly during tense periods (like these days) and in a tense region like the Middle East.



Palestine and its Refugees...

An Ethical Compass!

Ziad El-Sayegh

MECC Policies and Communication Advisor



The pain is deep. The pain is persistent since 1948, which makes it even deeper. Palestine is crucified with the hope of Resurrection. The Palestinians, whether residents or refugees, are oppressed by the occupation, while the whole world is watching. The Churches of Palestine are steadfastly resisting and seek to keep the flame of Truth burning, in collaboration with Muslim partners and enlightened Jews who oppose the atrocities of Zionism. Nevertheless, resistance is costly, as the humans of Palestine are bleeding. Palestinians are besieged and dismembered. They are obliged to live as strangers in their own homeland. For generations, the tragedy of asylum has been imposed on them, dispersing them in all corners of the earth. Between internal exile and scattered refugees, the problem lies in the fact that those entrusted with achieving just peace insist on dealing with the symptoms of pain and alienation. In fact, even until now, they did not start addressing the root causes of this tragedy. There is a suspicious silence behind the scenes of the decision-making process. Israel continues its aggression and has lately decided to annex parts

of the West Bank. In the course of Israel's historical aggression, this comes as a shocking plan that not only goes beyond ethics and international laws, but also flouts human conscience, justice and the right to self-determination.

In any case, relying on description of reality will only lead to the fatal depletion of resources. Therefore, we need to take practical steps without any hesitation to move from slogans and instant reactions. These practical steps should cover four levels: First, church diplomacy. Second, inter-religious diplomacy. Third, the faith-based organization diplomacy and finally, the popular diplomacy.

Focusing on these four levels does not mean minimizing the role of the United Nations. On the contrary, it means supporting and complementing the role of this exhausted and drained organization with a strong momentum that carries a system of values embedded in human conscience and religion, and consequently equal to an ecumenical framework of values. This process combines but is not limited to, the Palestinian concern anchored in the memory of the Middle East Council of Churches

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(MECC) and in the structure of the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees (DSPR), with the loud voice and international movement led by the World Council of Churches (WCC) to support the rights of the Palestinian people, and primarily the establishment of the State of Palestine with its capital Jerusalem and the return of refugees. Finally, it is all based on relevant United Nations and League of Arab States resolutions, as well as the positions of the churches of the Middle East and the world.

1- Palestine and Church Diplomacy

It is urgent to draw an effective path for church diplomacy that includes the churches of the Middle East and the world, and national, regional and international organizations, which are all institutions linked in their decisions and choices. Church diplomacy is a transition from taking a stand to support Palestine and its people, to

leading a professional lobbying movement in the corridors of decision-making based on a unified vision. This prophetic transition to systematic advocacy requires cooperation with experts in the geopolitical, networking, and communication fields, to call for an end to the ongoing Israeli aggression. It also requires the mobilization of intellectual, media, and even financial capabilities, and most importantly theological ones, to establish an ecumenical comprehensive theology in Palestine and include it in the curriculum of Christian education. Consequently, church diplomacy would be launched in the public sphere.

2- Palestine and Inter-Religious Diplomacy

All religions aim at upholding peace and justice, rejecting injustice and supporting the oppressed. The need to build an effective inter-religious diplomacy that carries the concerns of Palestine and its people emanates from a religious and social

responsibility that is linked to the protection of conscience and morals in the public sphere. This can be done by forming a coalition of specialized national, regional and international platforms to push governments, media and active socio-economic stakeholders to reorder their priorities and focus their work on ending the massacre in the Holy Land. Consequently, inter-religious diplomacy would shift from slogans to practicality.

3- Palestine and the Faith-based Organization Diplomacy

Moving from the church and the inter-religious levels to the diplomacy of faith-based organizations, which strives to safeguard human dignity and enforce justice in its political, legal, economic, social, cultural and educational dimensions: The diplomacy of religious organizations focuses on combining relief and developmental interventions, with a specific approach to execute effective influence. Such approach will be based on sustainable public policies, which complement periodic activities launched to respond to immediate needs. For example, this requires a deep conviction in the need to change mindsets and subsequently change the behavior of donors.

Relief and development are vital to respond to the needs of reality but they must be harmonized with a road map that prioritizes policies rather than the mere accumulation of services. Human dignity cannot be safeguarded by bread only, but by warning human beings – whether the victim or the society - that whoever violates their rights will be subject to accountability, and that there is an inevitable possibility to restore these violated rights.

4- Palestine and Popular Diplomacy

Palestinian people know more than anyone how to

launch their popular diplomacy that intersects with the ecclesiastical, inter-religious, and faith-based organizations' diplomacies. However, if a systematic launch that will lead to effective and definitive results were to take place, it is the Palestinian diaspora, with its brilliant elites and valuable capabilities, who can successfully accomplish this task by identifying clear goals and uniting efforts.

Some may think that what was mentioned above is nothing but an intellectual exhaustion of the Palestinian tragedy that has been ongoing since 1948. However, history proves in its philosophical dialectic, and through Divine Providence, that Justice can be restored through relentless and intelligent perseverance. By reflecting the suffering of Jesus on the cross, Palestine and its refugees, remain a moral compass and a symbol of hope of Resurrection. Therefore, we are all concerned by the Palestinian tragedy and its repercussions. ■



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The Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees More than 60 years of service to safeguard the dignity of refugees ... until they return to their land

Dr Bernard Sabella

Executive Secretary – Central Office – Jerusalem



The Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees (DSPR) of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) was established in the early fifties following the displacement of more than 250 000 Palestinians who were forced to leave their homes in 1948. Several people from the local clergy along with volunteers from old Jerusalem gathered to help and support refugees. Once they realized that the Palestinian refugee situation is going to become a protracted crisis, they established 5 Area Committees in 5 different regions: Jerusalem and West Bank; Amman and East Bank; the Gaza Strip; Jordan and Lebanon. The Area Committees are registered each in the country or region in which they operate (Notification and Announcement report), namely:

1. Joint Christian Committee for Social Service in Lebanon (JCC). Registration Date: 3/5/1961
2. Near East Council of Churches Committee for Refugee Work (NECCCRW) in Jordan. Registration Date: 5/7/1960
3. International Christian Committee (ICC) in Jerusalem and West Bank. Registration Date: 23/1/1962
4. International Christian Committee in Israel (ICCI - Galilee). Registration Date: 1962
5. Near East Council of Churches Committee for Refugee Work (NECCCRW) in Gaza. Registration Date: 1974

The department has a central committee composed of 9 members representing the five Area committees

and the four ecclesiastical families. The decisions and recommendations of this committee are submitted to the central office in Jerusalem for implementation and follow-up. Until 1997, the central office was located in Cyprus, then it was moved to old Jerusalem upon the decision of the Presidents of the Council. The staff of the Central office includes the executive secretary and 4 other employees in charge of finance, programs, communication and administration.

As a result of extensive consultations held thanks to the remarkable efforts of Dr. Souraya Bechealany, the Secretary General of the Middle East Council of Churches, with the participation of Professor Ziad Al-Sayegh, Father Gaby Hashem, and Dr. Audi Qawwas the president of the DSPR central committee, we have reached a memorandum of understanding in November 2019 that restored the relationship between our department and the council, noting that we, as DSPR, have always considered ourselves an integral part of the council.

This memorandum of understanding was blessed by the honorable Presidents of the Council who made their valuable comments on the document. The diligent and calm approach adopted by the Secretary General has resulted in restoring things to what they were before, emphasizing the need for joint efforts in our ecumenical work, especially during these critical times full of challenges.

The department holds regular meetings for the Central Committee twice a year, as well as a round table gathering the partners every eighteen months. The Secretary General of the Council or his/her representative attends the meetings of the department ex officio, where he/she gives a speech in which he/she reviews the developments that have taken place since the last meeting of the department. The executive secretary of the department is invited to participate in the meetings of the MECC executive committee where

he/she submits a detailed report on the department. There are more than five million Palestinian refugees in the Middle East in more than sixty refugee camps run by UNRWA – United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees. Our department operates in 23 of these camps. In 2017, the department adopted the 2017-2021 strategic plan that encompasses five goals:

- 1) The health of Palestinian refugees and displaced people
- 2) Economic empowerment
- 3) The empowerment of local camps to address the needs of their residents and protect their rights.
- 4) Supporting the rights of refugees and displaced people
- 5) The financial sustainability of the department

Most of the regional challenges are manmade. In the occupied Palestinian territories, the occupation has imposed a tight embargo on the Gaza Strip, which disturbs the lives of nearly two million people. Unemployment affects all residents and more than eighty percent of the population living in the Gaza strip needs food and financial assistance. Drinking water is contaminated while waste is discharged into the sea, which increases the severity of the pollution. Military confrontations occur from time to time, exposing residents, especially children, to traumas with long-term effects. The United Nations has stated that Gaza is unlivable due to pollution, lack of drinking water and disruption of economic life.

Our department in Gaza provides help that can alleviate the harsh living conditions and address the needs of a large number of residents. We have 3 medical clinics that offer services to around 100 000 people. The department also offers a vocational training program for hundreds of young women and men, as well as counseling services for mothers and children, and

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makes sure children are getting the iron they need in their food.

In Jerusalem and the West Bank, the separation wall that Israel has built has separated many local communities that are now in need of humanitarian intervention to protect their livelihoods. There, the department assists in setting up agricultural infrastructure and wells and empowers women through economic projects.

In Galilee, the inequality against Arab citizens and the adoption of the Jewish nation-state law will most certainly increase disparities. In addition to that, the Arab community in Israel suffers from violence that leaves dozens of deaths every year, and the increasing religious sensitivity reflects the fact that the national identity has weakened, which creates critical conditions that are unsuitable for communication and joint action. Therefore, the Department organizes activities and programs in Galilee that seek to strengthen communication between different groups and encourage secondary school teachers to meet and learn about the religious and cultural heritage of different religious and ethnic groups. It also strives to face increased violence and trains students from different backgrounds on leadership and communication with others. It also seeks to extend aid to female students who dropped out of school in a specialized center in the coastal city of Acre.

In Jordan, which faces unprecedented economic and social challenges due to the large influx of refugees (approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees and 2 million Palestinian refugees), the department provides medical services in two clinics in addition to vocational trainings and economic empowerment, especially for young women. It also offers counseling services and manages women's groups aimed at helping participants face challenges and pressure.

In Lebanon, the situation is similar to the one in

Jordan, and the economic conditions have significantly worsened. To make things worse, two million Syrian refugees and about half a million Palestinian refugees who live in camps isolated from the rest of the Lebanese society, whether at work, in schools or in other public areas, reside in the country. The department in Lebanon supervises social centers in the camps and manages the agricultural center in Tyr as well as a kindergarten. It also organizes vocational trainings and extends a helping hand to refugee students who want to continue their studies and obtain official academic certificates.

As for the relief activities carried out by our department, we were among the first to participate in the establishment of the Act Palestine Forum twenty years ago and we joined the Act Syria Lebanon Jordan Forum when it was founded after the crisis in Syria. Our department remains active within Act Alliance and hosts its meetings in Jerusalem. We also participate in its various activities, but the problem today is that funding provided by church partners has become scarce. Nevertheless, as a department, we continue to cooperate with ACT Alliance and attend its general assemblies which are held every 4 years. We also take part in the workshops and meetings organized in the region and the world.

Moreover, through continuous communication with Dr. Souraya Bechealany, the Secretary-General, along with Professor Ziad Al-Sayegh, and after adopting the 2017-2021 strategic plan, we reached the conviction that we should adopt an advocacy plan aimed at upholding the rights of Palestinian refugees, including the right of return recognized by the United Nations. Until the right of return is achieved, improving the life conditions of Palestinian refugees and providing them with a dignified life will remain our cause and main goal. ■

An overview of the local committees that became associations to serve the Palestinian refugees



The International Christian Committee in the West Bank – Occupied Jerusalem Capital of Palestine

The International Christian Committee - West Bank was established 60 years ago and serves as a local committee for the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees. When the Nakba occurred in Palestine in 1948, officials from four social ecclesiastical institutions from the World Council of Churches gathered in July of the same year, aiming at assisting refugees regardless of their religion. Their call was heard, and they started receiving in-kind and cash assistance. The Near East Council of Churches Committee, which is a private, non-profit organization composed of members with experience in the administrative and social fields, was established to address the Nakba consequences. The scale of the Nakba was large, as were the needs, but the focus was mainly on children, as the cities where they sought refuge did not have the means to

house them, and those children were completely helpless. Therefore, schools were established to receive 700 children. An additional feeding center was attached to each school, and students were provided with appropriate clothing. These schools remained under the umbrella of the committee until 1953 when they were handed over to UNRWA.

Following the 1948 Nakba, another tragedy unfolded hitting the Palestinian people when the borders were determined in the context of the armistice, depriving 111 villages in the West Bank, later known as the Front Villages, of their productive lands, which are a main source of livelihood for their people. At that time, the UNRWA did not offer its services to the residents of those villages on the pretext that they were not displaced from their original dwellings.

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Nevertheless, the committee was there and played a major role in providing relief aid, focusing on the education and health sectors. In addition to that, it launched many productive projects such as sewing and agricultural nurseries in an attempt to enhance the resilience of the people. The council took the initiative to provide some of the residents with food, clothing, treatment and even building materials. Residents were ready to work hard: They watered the land, built internal and connecting roads, and established the infrastructure necessary to deliver drinking water from the only stream of the village, turning, for example, the barren lands of the Beit Surik into green.

As if the Nakba was not enough, it was followed by seven lean years between 1958 and 1964, when the country was hit by waves of droughts that ravaged livestock and grain crops. The response was rapid through primary relief materials, which were accompanied by constructive projects that focused on rooting to prevent soil erosion and supporting the agricultural sector. The committee set up projects to help the rural areas by building schools, clinics, among other facilities.

When the rural community made progress and the relief projects' objectives were achieved, the Council launched a new project aiming at establishing the first family welfare center in 1964 in the village of Al-Qubeiba. Before the end of 1969, there were already three additional centers in Al-Yamun, Beit Ur, and Deir Dibwan. Since the early 1970s, the Council has continued focusing its programs on the agricultural sector through the construction of agricultural roads, land reclamation, distribution of trees with the aim of preserving and protecting the land and providing farmers with a stable source of income.

The Rural Projects Program has evolved and has been linked to clear development goals and strategies to tackle stifling unemployment and improve all basic facilities in more than 450 villages in the West Bank.

From the start, relief programs were flexible, developed, and focused with the aim of saving communities and their members from the clutches of the three enemies of humanity: ignorance, poverty and disease. The Council dealt with the repercussions of the first Intifada and interacted positively with it by following the same developmental trends. It increased its support as it responded to the second Intifada and was able, despite the obstacles resulting from the occupation, to continue its programs which are focused on development, mobilization, advocacy, awareness and empowerment, all while following a clear strategic direction.

The International Christian Committee (ICC) in Nazareth

The Christian Committee was established in Nazareth in the early 1970s thanks to the efforts of Dr. Sami Greissi. It was officially registered in 1982. The committee is one of the five branches of the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees.

At the organizational level, it consists of 12 members representing the various ecclesiastical families in the Holy Land: The Catholic family, the Orthodox family, the Eastern churches family and the Evangelical family.

The Palestinian population living inside Israel amounts to about two million people, which constitutes nearly 20% of the total population of the state. Most of them live in the Galilee region or the Triangle area, and some of them live in



mixed Israeli cities.

The committee's headquarters are in Nazareth, in Galilee. Its services and activities are mainly concentrated in the Galilee region.

Since there are no refugee camps in the committee's working area, the committee focuses on two main axes: First, the economic empowerment of marginalized groups among the Palestinian people, especially the displaced. Second, the support offered to leaders among the youth in order to increase their sense of responsibility towards their local communities, enhances their educational, cultural and social capabilities and increases their awareness of their collective identity.

The committee addresses polarization and extremism within society and between communities, as well as economic and political discrimination faced by the Palestinian society internally in terms of education, government

support, infrastructure, inequality and marginalization.

The committee works to establish a culture of peace, equality and openness to the Other within all religious, cultural and national groups.

Through its activities, the committee promotes the capabilities of young men and women through programs aimed at increasing their leadership skills within their local communities, and promoting the value of education and work, especially among girls from marginalized socioeconomic groups. Through the educational loans program, the committee provides opportunities to those who wish to complete their education especially to students from marginalized groups. It offers them educational loans that they can pay back after the end of their specialization.

The ICC also seeks to enhance communication between members of the same community who

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belong to different religious backgrounds, through dialogue programs and visits to holy sites.

The Near East Council of Churches Committee for Refugee Work (NECCRW) in Gaza

The Near East Council of Churches Committee for Refugee Work (NECCRW) in Gaza was established in 1952 following the launch of a humanitarian project aimed at assisting Palestinians who took refuge in Gaza after the declaration of the establishment of Israel in 1948. The local Gaza committee is part of the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees which is one of the Middle East Council of Churches' departments and an integral part of the Palestinian society and culture. This department operates with the support of churches and international secular organizations.

The Council of Churches focused on providing humanitarian assistance to contribute to

improving living conditions and alleviating poverty. Its work is based on respect for human dignity and on standards of transparency and accountability.

The Council of Churches supports the Palestinian people through six main areas: health (primary health care for mothers and children), education and vocational training (economic empowerment of young people), educational loans for university students, as well as psychosocial support for children, mothers and students to help them deal with the negative impact of violence in Gaza, and emergency relief projects, including the Community Development Program, cash relief, job creation initiatives, advocacy policies, and community development activities.

The Council of Churches Committee runs three family health care centers in the Gaza Strip. These three centers are located in al-Daraj quarter, Al Shejaiya neighborhood and Rafah. These centers serve 80,000, 120,000 and 20,000 people in



al-Daraj, Shejaiya and Rafah, respectively.

Many obstacles and challenges face the committee mainly the decrease in donor support in recent years, political conflict and security concerns, the deteriorating living conditions of the population, the emergence of health and psychosocial problems and poverty. Therefore, the Council of Churches Committee maintains a high level of emergency preparedness, works on establishing good relations with local communities and ensures inclusiveness and impartiality.

Financial resources depend to a large extent on external aid. Thus, the committee will contact more donors to enhance communication and develop joint action plans.

Adding to that, the shortage of several basic medicines as a result of the blockade, so the committee maintains a reserve of medical supplies for emergencies, and coordinates with

other international organizations to help secure the required resources. Not to mention the difficulties in securing the necessary equipment, consumables and raw materials due to the blockade and closed borders. Also, the Gaza strip experiences power outages of more than 16 hours per day which constitutes a major challenge, especially since it has a dramatic impact on social services such as health and education, on living conditions, on the quantity and quality of water, and the mental state of communities.

In the future, the committee seeks to keep its current programs ongoing and provide preventive and curative health care services in order to enhance the health and well-being of Palestinians in the three areas it operates: in al-Daraj, Shejaiya and Rafah (Khirbet el Aadas). It will also work on promoting the inclusion of

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persons with disabilities, focus on early childhood development approaches, develop programs to combat gender-based violence and raise awareness about women's rights.

It will also continue providing vocational and educational training to empower marginalized Palestinian youth. Moreover, the committee will strengthen networking and develop a fundraising strategy.

In addition to that, it is planning on providing training in capacity building focused on fundraising and communication skills that are absolutely necessary and useful to the main employees of the committee.

The Joint Christian Committee (JCC) in Lebanon

The Joint Christian Committee (JCC) in Lebanon is one of the five Area committees of the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees.

It was established in Lebanon in the 1950's, following the Palestinian Nakba and the arrival of large numbers of refugees to Lebanon. After providing relief to refugees through basic life necessities, the committee evaluated the most important needs and requirements to support this afflicted population and decided to make vocational education and training a priority in its services. It established 15 schools and several vocational institutes for training in carpentry, blacksmithing, sewing, leather industries and electrical tools repair. Thousands of people who benefited from these trainings and acquired valuable skills, graduated from these schools and institutes and travelled to the Arab countries to work in various fields and send money to their refugee families in Lebanon.

However, the scarce financial support forced the committee to close these schools and most of its institutes, even though the high leadership

insisted on providing services despite the difficult circumstances. It was ready to defy obstacles in order to empower the Palestinian refugee community in Lebanon through knowledge and skills so that Palestinian children can become pillars in their families and society while preserving their Palestinian identity and heritage. The centers of the committee are located in Sabra and Shatila camp - Beirut, Ein El-Hilweh camp - Saida, Al-Buss camp - Tyr, Dbayeh camp and the Galilee camp in the Bekaa region. These centers offer various programs, including a kindergarten, classes for dropouts, academic support courses, literacy lessons, vocational training in electronics and computer maintenance, training in grooming for men and women, agricultural training and beekeeping, jewelry making and other arts such as painting on glass or wood and candle making. These centers also include libraries, a sports club, and sports teams for soccer, basketball, and tennis. Moreover, they conduct workshops for parents, young men and women or any member of the local community who wants to attend the sessions.

Since the arrival of Syrian refugees to Lebanon, the committee has focused on the education of children and young men and women, especially at the middle and secondary levels, in coordination with the Ministry of Education in Syria. Education is carried out by Syrian professors, and students take official exams and obtain certificates in Syria.

The committee gets support from several international organizations, especially ecclesiastical ones, and cooperates with several local associations working with Palestinians. The challenges are many but what is really difficult is to attract young people and empower

them educationally and professionally, especially that they have lost their most basic rights such as the right to work and travel and the right of ownership, which negatively impacts them and limits their ambition.

The challenges include the following:

- 1- Overcrowding in the camps, especially after the Syrian refugee crisis, which aggravated poverty and destitution and caused an increase in child labor. Plus, UNRWA scaled down its activities due to the financial crisis it is currently facing.
- 2- Low financial support.
- 3- The significant decrease in the value of the Lebanese currency.

Despite all the challenges, the committee seeks to develop its services and empower its employees. It aims at contributing to the development of the Palestinian refugee community in Lebanon by empowering women and defending their rights, especially when it comes to early marriage and domestic violence. The committee also strives to secure sufficient funding to keep offering its different services and pursue its mission at the service of refugees, a mission that has been ongoing for more than 70 years in the name of churches and following the teachings of the Holy Bible. ■

**World Council of Churches, Middle East Council of Churches
write letter appealing to EU for firm stance against annexing occupied Palestinian
territory**



In a joint letter to foreign ministers that are part of the European Union, the World Council of Churches (WCC) and Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) appealed for a firm and principled stance by the European Union against any annexation by Israel of occupied Palestinian territory in the West Bank.

The organizations are “calling on the EU to ensure that any such annexation is met with real consequences, at least commensurate with those adopted by the EU in response to Russia’s annexation of Crimea.”

The letter also expresses the WCC and MECC’s commitment “to the vision of a just peace for all people in the Holy Land.”

The unilateral annexation of yet more of the territory that remains to Palestinians cannot lead to justice or to peace, but only to greater injustice, dispossession, escalating tensions, regional destabilization, and

the further erosion of respect for international law, the letter notes.

“The EU must not be complicit – by inaction or inadequate reaction – in this outcome,” the letter concludes. ■

INTERVIEW

The Former Secretary General of World Council of Churches (WCC):

REV. DR. OLAV FYSKE TVEIT:

Interviewed by Huguette Salameh



The martyrdom and sacrifice of Eastern Christians remains a powerful inspiration for world Christianity

On the last day of his mandate, and before he hands over his responsibilities to a new Secretary General and take on another mission in his home country as presiding bishop for Church of Norway, Rev. Dr Olav Fyske Tveit, the outgoing general secretary of the World Council of Churches, has stated, in an interview with the Communication and Public Relations Department of the Middle East Council of Churches, that Christians in the Middle East convey an exceptional message as inhabitants of the cradle of Christianity and the Holy land.

INTERVIEW

REV. DR. OLAV FYSKE TVEIT

Tveit added that “their attachment to this land and their devotion and commitment to the mission shared by churches around the world act as a stabilizing factor for global Christianity”.

During this special meeting, Rev. Dr Olav Fyske Tveit described his relationship with the Middle East Council of Churches and Middle Eastern churches during his ten-year tenure at the general secretariat of the World Council of Churches. He also talked about his close relationship with His Holiness Pope Francis and the rapprochement with the Catholic Church. In addition, most importantly, he vowed to remain a loyal friend to the Middle East region that he has always cherished and carried in his heart.

Now that your mandate has ended, what can you tell us about the experiences you had in the Middle East region during these 10 years? How did they influence your perspective and touch your heart?

The Middle East has been in the focus of my ministry and work as GS from the very beginning until the end. The last travel before I left was to the region, to Amman, discussing the work for a just peace for the Palestinian people with church representatives from Palestine. The just peace for Palestine and Israel was one of my strong involvement in the ecumenical movement before I was elected as well. I have tried to bring the attention to the situation for the Churches and the Christian communities in the whole Middle East region and visited most of the countries and the member churches there several times. The hopes that were awakened in the first part of this decade, that Middle East spring, with more respect for human rights, more dialogue between the religious communities, more efforts for peace

and stronger democracies, did not lead to what many hoped for. To the contrary, there has been more violence, and even the worst war with the most numbers of displaced people the world has seen since WWII. This means also less space and security for the Christian Churches and Communities. We have worked on issues related to this region every week, if not every day. There have been significant moments and processes of inter-religious dialogue that have given me a lot of hope. There have been significant moments where the Christian witness in this region has been amazing and strong, in spite of these challenges. The martyria of those Christians who have sacrificed health, safety, and even their own lives remain a strong asset for world Christianity. The situation in the different parts of the Middle East has touched my heart and I have tried to do what I and we as WCC could see was possible with our means. But I also hoped we could have done even more for justice and peace in the region, and to strengthen the Christian witness and presence there.

How do you describe the strategic cooperation established between the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC)? Do you consider it a success? What do you think should be improved to make this cooperation more fruitful and the relationship between the two councils more complementary in order to better promote the ecumenical spirit in our world?

The relationship between MECC and WCC has developed and improved in this period. I think the cooperation on several issues, also quite practical cooperation like in the communication work, has

shown very fruitful for both parties. The last years we have been able to revitalize and strengthen the relationships between the WCC and the Regional Ecumenical Organizations, which I think benefit all, as we are one ecumenical movement serving together the same triune God and have the same call.

Pope Francis visited the WCC in Geneva on 21 June 2018, even though the Roman Catholic Church is not amongst the members of WCC. How did this unprecedented visit influence the WCC and change its approach and strategy? Did this visit occur thanks to your personal relation with Pope Francis or was it the result of a strengthened and more developed relationship between the WCC and the Catholic Church around the world?

The visit of Pope Francis at the 70th anniversary of the WCC in Geneva and Bossey was a significant

manifestation of the one ecumenical movement, our shared basis in faith, in mission, in service for the world. The theme “Walking, praying, and working together” emphasized the pilgrimage approach to ecumenism that has dominated Pope Francis’ approach over the last years as well as the profile and work of the WCC since the 10th assembly in 2013. So the institutional and programmatic approach had been strengthening over many years, but particularly over the last years. I have had the privilege to meet with Pope Francis and we have had a strong sense of sharing the same visions and ecumenical call. I hope I could contribute to this strengthening of the relationships and the motivation for his visit. We have seen many fruits of this visit. The ecumenical movement and particularly the work of the WCC has become better known all over the world, also among Catholics, and it has become a motivation for more common initiatives at the local and national level.



INTERVIEW

REV. DR. OLAV FYSKE TVEIT

As outgoing general secretary of the World Council of Churches and new presiding bishop for Church of Norway, what message do you want to address to the Middle Eastern Churches, especially during these difficult times?

Your faith and your faithfulness to the call we share as churches is and will be significant for the churches around the whole world. You represent

significant because of the common roots we have in your region. Therefore, how you can develop the dialogue and the relationships there is of high significance for the peace among religions globally, and therefore also for world peace. However, the conflicts in the Middle East are not primarily about religion, but about national and geopolitical interests. Religion often been used as a platform for violence and conflict. This is one of the reasons why your Christian presence and



“CHRISTIANS OF THE MIDDLE EAST CARRY AN EXCEPTIONAL MESSAGE, BEING THE CHILDREN OF THE CRADLE OF CHRISTIANITY AND THE HOLY LAND, AND THEIR ROOTEDNESS IN THEM AND THEIR DEVOTION TO THE VOCATION SHARED BY THE CHURCHES OF THE WORLD IS A CONSTANT FACTOR FOR CHRISTIANITY THROUGHOUT THE WORLD.”



the region in which our faith has its roots, and the holy places in your region are holy for the whole of Christianity. These holy places should also have Christian communities and witness in the future. The relationships to other religions in your region, to Jews and Muslims particularly, are

your witness in your Christian faith for just peace is so important in the mosaic of your societies. The churches elsewhere in the world continue to pray for you, and walk and work with you. May God continue to bless and strengthen you in your work as churches, and together as MECC! ■

CORONA

In the Face of Covid-19: The Story of a Virus that Turned Houses into Prayer Altars



There is no single doubt that the unprecedented months of total lockdown and home quarantine imposed by the coronavirus will forever remain engraved in the memory of humanity. In the following pages, the MECC Communication and Public Relations Department wanted to be a witness to this critical phase in the history of the Middle East region, by portraying the

concerns and reactions of its people, the wisdom of its churches and the measures taken by its governments to face this invading enemy. It relied on documentation, analysis, statistics and most importantly living facts extracted from reality, to tell the story of a virus that forced churches into closure and turned houses into prayer altars and rays of hope.

With the Closure of Churches, Believers United in Hearts and Prayed Together... Virtually

Prepared by Elia Nasrallah

There is no doubt that a deadly enemy has attacked humanity and forced it into quarantine for months. However, this microscopic foe called Coronavirus (Covid-19) could not undermine people's faith and destroy their relationship with God the Creator in spite of its destructive effects. Many measures have been taken all over the world to limit the spread of this pandemic, including the closure of churches and places of worship. At first sight, Christians received this news with great sadness which pushed them to raise many questions such as: how do we pray now? How do we participate in the Mass? During the Lent season, how do we prepare ourselves for the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ? New communication technologies came as an answer to all these questions, even though only

few days before, many considered them an extremely harmful type of addiction. Through social media, priests, religious officials and ecclesiastical institutions were able to communicate with every believer, family and group in their own home... and just like that, houses were turned into small churches and screens into altars. At first, Christian institutions and ecclesiastical families contributed to awareness campaigns to curb the spread of the pandemic, and some of them posted preventative guidance and educational reports on Covid-19 on their social media pages. For example, on the Coptic Orthodox Church spokesperson's page, advice and preventive measures taken by the Egyptian government have been published with "hashtags" such as #Protect

yourself_ protect your country, #In charge of_each other, #Safe_At_Home, #Stay_At_Home, in Arabic. The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East has also published preventive guidelines that should be followed once churches open their doors.

The Coronavirus could not stand in the way of Christians and prevent them from participating in Masses. Parish priests broadcasted prayers through the "Live" option on Facebook so that believers can follow them, each from their home. Thus, the number of participants in the prayers on Facebook doubled day after day. The priests published weekly and monthly prayer brochures and booklets or sent them to their congregations through WhatsApp. Communications officers in patriarchates, dioceses, and parishes worked on preparing video and audio prayers or interventions and published them on their social media pages. The objective was to alleviate people's anxiety and help them overcome the current circumstances with great hope and faith.

On the page of the official speaker of the Catholic Church in Egypt, several audio interventions and homilies have been published to alleviate spiritual suffering. On the page of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Zahleh and Baalbek and Dependencies, sayings of the Metropolitan Antonios El Soury were published to console people...

His Beatitude Cardinal Mar Bechara Boutros Al-Rahi, the Maronite Catholic Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, also created a daily routine to pray the Rosary, live from the Church of Bkerke, and accompany believers virtually by praying with them for the world to be saved from the virus.

Since a large number of citizens had more free time on their hands during quarantine, religious institutions and ecclesiastical families have intensified Christian formation through the publication of daily or weekly sermons, homilies and seminars, such as the Syrian Catholic Patriarchate of Antioch which posted the sermons of His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius Youssef III Younan.



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Priests also communicated with believers in their parishes using virtual means, to accompany them spiritually. Youth movements resumed their weekly meetings electronically through several applications. Young people were always so happy to participate in the meetings previously held in the churches and its squares. Therefore, the Coronavirus did not prevent the leaders of these movements from following up with young men and women, guiding them through discussions about social and religious topics, reading and interpretation of the Bible, and making videos specially tailored for youth to publish on social media. For example, the Evangelical church in Hurgada posted on its page, several educational seminars similar to those held during Sunday school meetings.

One cannot forget the importance of social work during this difficult period, that is why priests and officials launched several initiatives to help families in need, while taking into consideration necessary

preventive measures.

Moreover, many national and international prayers were held in all patriarchates, dioceses, and parishes, in which each individual participated from his/her home through social media platforms, to stand in solidarity with the volunteering staff and those infected by the virus. For example, His Beatitude Patriarch Ibrahim Ishaq Sedrak, Coptic Catholic Patriarch of Alexandria, called for the dedication of Friday, 13 March 2020, to be a day of prayer for Coronavirus patients and for all those who had passed away.

17 Lebanese religious institutions also issued a joint appeal in response to the initiative of the Higher Committee for Human Fraternity, under the patronage of His Holiness Pope Francis and His Eminence the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Sheikh Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, who called people, from all over the world, on Thursday May 14th, 2020, for a day of prayer, fasting, invocation, and charity, in order to overcome the Corona pandemic.



With Closure or Against it: A Heated Debate within the Church!

The decision to close churches was difficult, but necessary. Although the issue of participation in prayers and liturgy was resolved through live broadcast various social media platforms of patriarchates, dioceses and parishes, or on religious and secular television channels, a controversy arose following this decision due to the different opinions about it. Some of the clergy and believers opposed the idea of closure and considered that, with the increasing severity of the pandemic, human beings will be under huge psychological pressure and will suffer from anxiety. As such, they will turn to God in search of hope. They will therefore be in need of the Church, which plays a role of spiritual sanctuary. They also stressed the fact that this closure may push people to drift away from sacred rituals and search for their comfort in other places. They insisted that Mass is a source of blessings, and not



a source of disease and pandemics, and claimed that the decision must be reconsidered.

On the other hand, supporters of the decision insisted that the virus is very dangerous and that any infected believer participating in prayer or Mass may transmit the infection to other believers or even to the priest, thus spreading the virus to even more people. Hence, this decision was taken to protect the safety of all believers.

In the same context, views also differed on the sacrament of the Eucharist, the basis of every Mass. Some believed that sacred instruments are not affected by diseases and pandemics, and that communion is the secret of life which heals us from sin and from spiritual and physical diseases. They highlighted the fact that the priest, at the end of each Mass, takes what remains in the same cup from which all believers, including the sick and the healthy, also eat and drink. If diseases were transmitted through the sacrament of the Eucharist, priests would be among the first infected. As such, they pointed out that no human being has died in history due to their participation in the Eucharist during past pandemics such as the plague and cholera. As for those opposing this theory, they considered that the sacrament of communion



purifies and heals a person from mental and spiritual diseases and renews his life, and therefore does not prevent death or heals from physical ailments, but rather is given to only forgive sins and grant eternal life. They stressed the need to follow science to heal infected people and adhere to preventive measures to reduce the spread of the virus. Meanwhile, patriarchates took several decisions and measures regarding this matter, adhering to the decision to close churches. They recommended

that collective participation should be suspended, and that prayers, orders, and liturgy be held by the priests, clergy, and some deacons in their churches without the attendance of other believers. The Syriac Patriarchate of Antioch and other patriarchates called for funerals to be held only in the presence of the priest and the family of the deceased without accepting condolences face-to-face. The Secretariat of the Holy Synod headed by His Holiness Pope Tawadros II, stressed the need to continue pastoral work for families, especially in special cases, through social media platforms. It

recommended that sewing workshops established in the dioceses should contribute to making medical clothes and equipment. In turn, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and all the East called clergy and monks to cooperate fully with the competent authorities in the health sector, in order to protect the health security and social peace of the community. The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem issued several decisions taking into account Arabic-speaking believers who follow the Gregorian calendar, Arabic-speaking believers who follow the Julian calendar, and non-Arabic-speaking believers and communities. It stated that circumstances do not allow face-to-face confessions, but that it is important to recite the Confiteor.

The Preparedness of the Middle East Council of Churches

On his part, the Middle East Council of Churches participated in awareness campaigns, starting with modifying its slogan to show its adherence to social distancing, to become M E C C instead of MECC. It also created a new page on its website related to Coronavirus. Within the framework of the Council's social responsibility, the Communication and Public Relations Department has posted precautionary measures through reports, photos and videos from reliable international medical sources and references. Daily prayers were also posted on this page and on the Council's social media platforms. Furthermore, MECC published church news related to confronting the virus and measures taken to limit its spread and repercussions. In addition to that, it posted news about the council's activities and staff meetings that were held virtually. The department also launched a new hashtag: #Churches_facing_Covid-19.

Moreover, the Middle East Council of Churches called member churches, with the blessing of its presidents, to hold prayers on Sunday March 22, 2020, to raise a unified voice and supplications for those infected with Corona and their families, and for the medical staff and health workers who risk their lives to provide treatment and prevention. Due to increasing numbers of contaminated people in Middle Eastern countries that were already staggering under the burden of numerous economic, social and health repercussions, the Middle East Council of churches launched a humanitarian appeal in an attempt to alleviate the suffering of people affected by this unprecedented global pandemic. This is done by supporting the most vulnerable through the provision of emergency lifesaving supplies which include basic hygiene items. During the Covid-19 pandemic, it became clear that distance can surely separate people physically, but they would stay united in heart. As we are the children of hope and we believe that our Lord Jesus Christ resurrected, we will rise again with Him overcoming these darks days and defeating all viruses! ■

Social Distancing or Social Solidarity?!

Prepared by Yara Boutros

We cannot deny that the coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19) has turned life upside down all around the world. In numbers, a study compared the effects of prolonged isolation to those of smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Checking news on recent developments that relate to the daily increase in new cases has become a daily routine, and sometimes an obsession for some people which drained them even further than the virus itself!

Working from Home

While it is true that some made efforts to maintain a healthy lifestyle, which includes engaging in moderate exercise, keeping a healthy diet and getting regular sleep, others struggled to manage chores, work remotely and take care of their

children at the same time...

According to a study recently published by Forbes, businesses across the world increasingly encouraged their employees to work from home while Americans alone have lost 10 million jobs. Across the European Union, unemployment is expected to rise to nine percent in 2020 and among European countries; Greece is expected to suffer the worst unemployment rate of 19.9 percent.

Virtual Education

According to UNESCO monitoring, over 120 countries have implemented nationwide school and university closures and the impact of this measure is being felt by over 70 percent of total



enrolled learners globally. For college and school students, the lasting economic impact of the pandemic is less worrisome than the psychological toll as the crisis has a profound emotional effect on them. The abrupt halt to life which they knew, is nothing short of heartbreaking. That is why many of them lost their motivation and their belief in future prospects. Due to the travel ban and cancelation of large gatherings, seniors missed their graduations and some juniors were denied once-in-a-lifetime experiences studying abroad. When taking numbers into account, the coronavirus has in fact drastically changed college for over 14 million students in the US alone.

As universities, schools and nurseries in every country in the Middle East region were shut down, the pandemic drove people's acceptance of remote learning, resulting in an entirely new learning experience. However, many obstacles hinder this fast and sudden transition. In the Arab

world, the attempted shift to online education highlighted the huge economic disparities between tiny, rich countries like Qatar, which has 100 percent Internet coverage, to sprawling Sudan which has 30 percent coverage. UNESCO sounded the alarm saying in a new report that 826 million students globally do not have computers of their own which confirms the huge digital gap at the global level. According to International Telecommunication Union's 2019 data, 48 percent of households in Arab countries do not have home Internet. This pushes us to conclude that learning is actually emerging as one of the hardest-hit business activities.

The Suffering of the Elderly

Among age groups, those who were the most affected by the crisis are probably the elderly. Based on several studies conducted in many countries, social isolation is already a problem in the older population where people aged 75



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or over, go for one month without speaking to a friend, neighbor or relative and the majority of people aged over 60 live alone. What matters even worse is that data from China showed that older people and those with chronic medical conditions may be at higher risk of catching the virus. In fact, the highest rate of fatalities is among older people, particularly those with underlying medical conditions. What's shocking is that in some countries, due to the pressure on the health care systems, hospitals have decided that it may become necessary to establish an age limit for access to intensive care; as if "those who are too old to have a good chance of recovery or with few years left to live will be allowed to die."

Moved by many tragic stories of elders who had died alone after no one took care of them or made sure they are doing fine, the whole world has mobilized support and resources to find practical solutions and ease the burden of

the pandemic on our seniors. In some countries, many supermarkets have made the decision to open their doors for two hours every morning exclusively for older people to minimize the risk of infection.

What is heartwarming is that all around the world, some people have actually volunteered to help them by buying their groceries and medications or running errands for them to avoid putting their lives in danger.

It is relieving to see that each one contributed in the best way possible for the sake of the common good, regardless of any other consideration. Driven by their survival instinct, people around the world were adjusting to a new reality of life during the coronavirus pandemic, doing their best to be resilient and there for each other. Funds were raised to help the most vulnerable and food vouchers, daily meals and hygiene kits were regularly distributed.



In fighting this disease, the world is witnessing such remarkable solidarity, as corona is being considered as the only common enemy. It is true that these times are extremely difficult on everyone without exception, but they have reignited love, compassion and unity in homes and communities.

In a world constantly drifting towards egoism, egocentrism, and isolation, where personal interests now rule as if this has become the new normal, it is now the time to reconsider: Which normal do we really want to go back to after this pandemic? Will we just go on with our lives as if nothing happened? ■

COVID-19 Has Left a Whole Region in Total Limbo

Prepared by Fouad Kazan

The coronavirus pandemic buckled worldwide economies, forcing an unanticipated level global depression never seen before. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the world will need a period of no less than 3 years to regain what it had lost during the proliferation of the virus. As local GDPs of powerful industrial countries have shrunk, even worse ramifications followed the Middle East. Thus, the ability to contribute to the development of these third-world nations has been seriously impaired as they are being abandoned to lick their own wounds. Even oil-rich countries such as Iraq are finding it quite problematic to maneuver past the hurdles forced by the situation. This is quite alarming for other countries that have no or very little access to oil reserves.

As such, in this article we will be briefly reviewing how COVID19- has atrociously impacted the Middle East in its wake.



Egypt and the Depletion of Financial Reserves

The country long reveled under a series of massive investments from abroad that stimulated the economy and reignited hopes of becoming a major economic power. However, all that seemed to fade away as COVID-19 infiltrated Egypt. According to Minister of Planning Hala-el Saad, foreign investments are expected to decrease by about 30 percent until the middle of the next fiscal year 2020/2021 if corona persists.

Confusion and Economic Deficit in Jordan

Due to the paralysis of businesses and the dip in

the country's revenue, it is expected that Jordan's cash-strapped economy is expected to shrink by 3.7 per cent this year. Although the country, made positive strides in fighting the spread of COVID-19, the infectivity rate kept fluctuating throughout the course of 3 months. Naturally, this left Jordan in an uncertain state leaving current and future investors unwilling to inject money into the Jordanian economy.

Iraq on the Brink of Collapse

Before the virus became a pandemic, Iraq had witnessed turmoil on the streets due to

the stagnating economic situation, the high level of unemployment, and the rampant corruption. However, when COVID-19 became a serious concern in Iraq, and oil revenues have evaporated due to the continuous drop in prices, the economy was pushed into the brink of catastrophe. According to a report recently published by the World Bank, Iraq's economy will shrink by 10% threatening to plunge millions into poverty. Instead of confining themselves to their homes, many Iraqis once again took to the streets consumed by more rage and desperation as their purchasing power and livelihood is diminishing.



Lebanon Facing a Massive Disaster

Indeed, Lebanon is the most country hit by the corona virus. Although the new government and the Ministry of Public Health have succeeded in implementing lockdown measures, which were considered to be far more effective than many first world countries, COVID-19 cases are still being reported. As such, the proliferation of COVID-19 within the country and the lockdown measures imposed thereafter, have severely impaired the economy, which was already impaled by the dollar shortage crisis and hyperinflation. The current economic situation has forced poverty levels to rise to a dangerous level of 70%.

Palestine Confronting a New Enemy

Not only Palestine has to worry about the Israeli occupation and the Zionist drive to annex territory, it has to consider COVID-19 as the next intruder. In an economic forecast conducted for 2020 during the coronavirus phase, the

Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) claimed that the Palestinian economy will suffer losses that can amount to \$2.5 billion of about in case the coronavirus pandemic lasts for three months, and the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) will decline by 14% in 2020 compared to 2019. Despite the drop in the infectivity rate, Palestine cannot afford such economic losses, especially when its economy is in ruins and being choked by Israel's reckless actions and its determination to usurp territory.

Syria: The Least Affected Country

The battle-hardened country may be the least affected by the corona pandemic as the number of infected and deaths are very low when compared to regional and worldwide statistics. This is due to the economic and diplomatic siege that has isolated the country, and the lockdown measures imposed by the regime. The Syrian Pound suffered from severe fluctuations that caused

hyperinflation in various sectors. The World Food Program warned that an estimated 9.3 million people in Syria have become food insecure, up from 7.9 million people months ago. Even UN Undersecretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock voiced his concern over the increased food insecurity in Syria as COVID-19 is indirectly impacting the economy of the war-torn country.

Questionable Positivity in Cyprus

The Mediterranean Island, on yearly basis, braces for summer and the rewards it can reap from visiting tourists. However, this year economists fear that this year might be different as the coronavirus situation remains unsolved. Very recently, the Cypriot government ended a strict coronavirus lockdown on the 21st of May, reopening outdoor restaurants, barber shops and beaches. However, hotels and vital airports remain closed. It seems that the government is

trying to avoid a 13% contraction of the economy, as detailed by the Finance Ministry's stability program . Yet, allowing Cyprus to open up to visiting flocks of people, might trigger another wave of COVID-19, thus impairing the economy and the wellbeing of its citizens.

There is no doubt that the region is in tatters and even if the coronavirus suddenly disappears, massive economic after-shocks will continue to be felt years on. Not only national industries have been paralyzed, external funding or donations will be dramatically reduced as economically endowed nations will have to tend to their own internal perils. Nevertheless, the pandemic had one minor silver lining: Military operations have been either brought to a halt or massively reduced. At the end of the day, foes can only realize that COVID-19 is the common enemy which requires bickering nations to put their differences aside and their geo-political agendas on hold. ■

CALLS AND PRAYERS TO CONFRONT THE CORONA VIRUS

A Communique from the Middle East Council of Churches in the Season of Lent and times of Coronavirus

With the blessing of the Heads of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), in this Season of Lent and in the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, which threatens all of humanity, the MECC wishes to issue the following Communique to its member churches and all people of good will.

Fasting is a time of meditation, prayer, and conversion during which Christians repent and ask God and each other for forgiveness. The Church starts by asking forgiveness, in preparation for Easter, the crossing from darkness to light, from death to resurrection. The Church Fathers likened that journey to the People of God, the Church,

crossing the desert into the Promised Land, the Land of the Covenant and into a new life with God, a journey in which they experienced hardships, difficulties, and temptations, while accepting God's Covenant, commandments, and salvation.

In the desert crossing, God revealed to His people the glow of His bright face and glory through patience, affection, and love. The forty-day fasting is about the old man accepting the gift of freedom in Christ's resurrection from the dead. Fasting helps humans consider their weaknesses and sins, repent to God and return to themselves and to their brothers and sisters.



Fasting helps them see the radiant face of God reflected in the image of His Son hanging on the cross in his infinite love for humanity. Fasting is also the yearning of the faithful for the lights of the Resurrection and the newness of divine life in the Holy Spirit.

Brothers and sisters, the crossing of the desert in this year's Lenten Season is utterly bitter and thorny, because of wars, migration, displacement, tragedies, epidemics, spiritual alienation, the weakening of human values and more. However, we do not despair, we are not dismayed, the Lord is with us. As the psalm says, our faces shall never be covered with shame, we seek the radiant face of Lord, we reach out to our brothers with love and strive to sanctify nature. The sense of responsibility before God requires from us to undertake an in-depth reflection into the meaning of fraternal solidarity among people and solidarity with nature, as a means of safeguarding the universe and its ecological balance, while struggling to redress the various processes and policies which resulted in the imbalance and disruption of the system. There is no point in fasting unless we empty ourselves in His image, "He who emptied himself taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are... he was humbler yet, and even to accepting death, death on the cross" (Philippians 2, 7-8), and unless we purify ourselves to overcome hardships, pain, and epidemics, and seek love, generosity, purity, and sacrifice.

Containment is imposed on us by the Corona epidemic, turning us into hostages in the desert of the fear of contamination and death. However, the Lord urges us "to keep our eyes fixed on him, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection: for the sake of the joy which lay

ahead of him, he endured the cross, disregarding the shame of it, and has taken his seat at the right of God's throne" (Hebrews 12, 2). The Lord walks with us and draws us towards him, the source of our strength and courage. This is an opportunity for rapprochement, reconciliation, support, and solidarity; an opportunity to help the needy, the sick and the displaced, an opportunity to test human fraternity in its divine depth, and to put ourselves into question while seeking to rediscover the meaning of our existence in the light of genuine spiritual and human values.

On behalf of all member churches, and with the blessing of our spiritual leaders, MECC is mobilizing its potentials while doubling efforts to carry out its spiritual and humanitarian duties in response to the current situation. Prayers will be held next Sunday, March 22, 2020 to raise a unified voice and supplications for those infected with Corona and their families, and for the medical staff and health workers who risk their lives to provide treatment and prevention, including public health officials, who, we hope, with God's help, will be able to contain the spread of the virus and prevent potential grave social, economic and environmental consequences. Next Sunday morning, we shall meet in deep prayer entrusting humanity and the universe "to the merciful Father and the God who gives every possible encouragement" (2 Corinthians 1, 3). All individuals and in various societies will hopefully recover their well-being, in an act of Christian and human solidarity derived from the heart of the Lord. We pray God Almighty to help us act in a spirit of responsibility, courage and sincerity in the service of people, so that the light of Christ who triumphed over evil and death, may radiate throughout our world. ■

CALLS AND PRAYERS TO CONFRONT THE CORONA VIRUS

MECC in Response to the Global Initiative for “Human Fraternity”: On 14 May, let us pray together as Christians and Muslims!

In response to the Higher Committee for Human Fraternity’s latest initiative, The Middle East Council of Churches renews its appeal for people to actively participate, on the 14th of May 2020, in a day of prayer, fasting, invocation, and charity, each according to his/her own religion or sect or belief, asking God to help us overcome the Corona pandemic which is threatening the lives of



millions of people, to inspire scientists to discover the appropriate cure, and to save the world from the medical, economic, and human consequences of this detrimental virus.

This initiative launched under the patronage of his Holiness Pope Francis and His Eminence the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Sheikh Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, was adopted by 17 faith-based Christian and Muslim organizations in Lebanon and the Arab World.

The Middle East Council of Churches sees this initiative as a new opportunity to confirm that “human fraternity” stems from our brotherhood in Christ and that spiritual solidarity can be lived through prayer and fasting.

Therefore, as an expression of our national unity, our religious social responsibility, and our global fraternal human solidarity, especially in these hard times that Lebanon is passing through, let us unite tomorrow, as Muslims and Christians, in one voice and one heart, and present our prayers and invocations to God Almighty, each in his/her own way following his/her own traditions, asking

Him to preserve mankind and to help it overcome this pandemic, while joining the initiatives that will be launched by faith-based organizations and broadcasted in the media and on social media platforms.

We also reiterate the call of the Committee, “doubling our individual and institutional efforts in helping those in need and securing necessary aid for them, starting with donating a value of money equivalent to what we would usually spend during a non-fasting day to the people most in need around us, and inviting everyone – each according to his/her own abilities – to contribute in supporting humanitarian initiatives, and ending with the commitment of our institutions to multiply their efforts and increase their assistance in this field without distinction between people, since human fraternity forbids us to remain indifferent to those who are hungry or in need”.

All the world today is in the same boat, so tomorrow, let us unite in prayer and ask God to have mercy on his children so that we survive this pandemic together! ■

A Time for Pastoral, Prophetic and Practical Christianity: A Joint Statement from the World Council of Churches and Regional Ecumenical Organizations

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.

(2 Cor. 4-1:3)



As representatives of Regional Ecumenical Organizations and the World Council of Churches, we share the challenges that our communities around the world are facing due to the coronavirus, COVID-19.

We urge people everywhere to give highest priority to addressing this situation and assisting

in whatever ways we can in our collective efforts to protect life. This is a time to touch each other’s hearts, by what we say, share, and do – and by what we are unable to do—to protect the life that God created out of love.

For the sake of that love, it is important and urgent that we adapt our modes of worship and

CALLS AND PRAYERS TO CONFRONT THE CORONA VIRUS

fellowship to the needs of this time of pandemic infection, in order to avoid the risk of becoming sources of viral transmission rather than means of grace.

Our faith in the God of life compels us to protect life by doing all that we can to avoid transmitting this virus. Let us manifest God's unconditional love in safe, practical ways that protect life, alleviate suffering, and ensure that churches and public services do not become hubs of transmission of the virus.

Physical distancing does not mean spiritual isolation. This is an opportune time for the churches all over the world to review their role in society by safely ministering to, providing for, and caring for the poor, the sick, the marginalized, and the aged—all those who are most at risk due to COVID-19.

People in many parts of the world have become homebound these days. Being homebound does not mean that we cannot experience a deep spiritual solidarity with each other, by virtue of our baptism into the one body of Christ. We can pray at home. We can give thanks to God and pray for strength, healing, and courage. We can show our love for God and our neighbour by not gathering in person for public worship. Many congregations can share their worship gatherings online or digitally. Members and pastors can also stay in touch with each other and provide pastoral care by telephone.

The novel coronavirus pandemic has reached all the regions of our planet. There are fear and panic, pain and suffering, doubt and misinformation, about both the virus and our response as Christians. Yet as a global community of faith, we affirm that, even in the midst of our vulnerability, we trust in God, as God is our hope.

Amid stories of suffering and tragedy, there are also stories of simple kindness and extravagant love, of solidarity and the sharing of hope and peace in innovative and surprising ways.

During this Lenten season, our pilgrimage takes us through the desert of hardships, difficulties, and temptations, from death to resurrection, into a new life with God.

This desert is made more hostile and fearful by COVID-19, but we are called to join our hearts in solidarity with each other, to mourn with those who mourn, to share peace with those who are anxious, and to restore hope through solidarity in faith.

That human solidarity is eroded and anxiety is heightened when we are in panic and concentrate on shopping and hoarding the basics. In so doing, we fail to be instruments of God's grace in this season.

We recognize the need for responsible leadership by the state, communities, and faith leaders alike. Governments at all levels must ensure access to correct and timely information, address the situations due to loss of livelihood and employment, especially to provide access to clean water and sanitizers and soap, to safe shelter, and to compassionate care for the most vulnerable, while aware that some of these remain challenges for many across the globe. This is also a time for profound reflection on the common good, good governance, and ethical values rooted in our traditions.

In the midst of this grave crisis, we lift up our prayers for those providing leadership and for governments around the world, urging them to give priority concern to those who live in poverty, as well as to the marginalized and refugees living in our midst.

As religious leaders, we raise our collective voices to highlight the necessity for greater attention to the needs of the homeless, the incarcerated, the elderly and those already suffering from social isolation. We remember, too, those people, especially women and children, who face abuse and violence, who are not safe at home and may suffer additional abuse and violence as stress increases.

Finally, let us continue to pray for those infected with COVID-19, for their families, and for the medical staff and health workers who risk their lives to provide treatment and prevention for us. And let us pray for public health officials, who, we hope, will be able, with God's help and our cooperation, to contain the spread of the virus and prevent grave social, economic, and environmental consequences.

God's love is all-embracing, and the God of life is with each of us, even in our suffering.

26 March, 2020

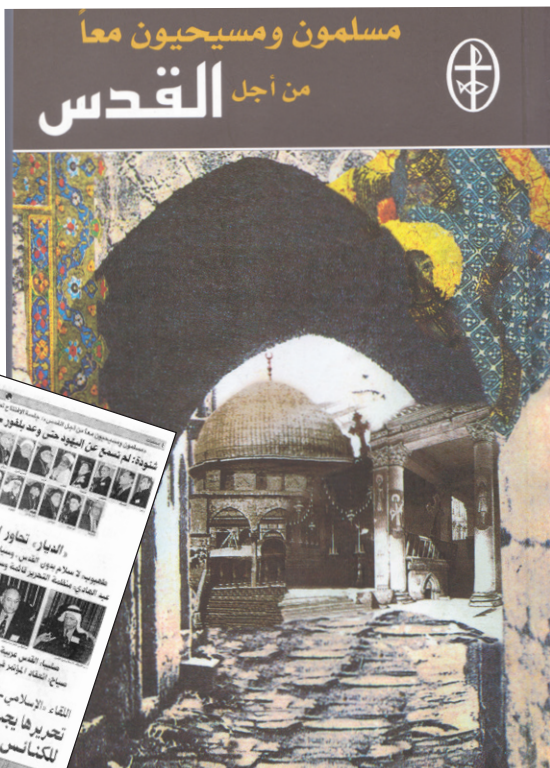
- Rev. Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit, General Secretary, World Council of Churches
- Dr. Souraya Bechealany, General Secretary, Middle East Council of Churches
- Rev. James Bhagwan, General Secretary, Pacific Conference of Churches
- Dr. Mathews George Chunakara, General Secretary, Christian Conference of Asia
- Gerard Granado - General Secretary, Caribbean Conference of Churches
- Rev. D.r Fidon Mwombeki, General Secretary, All Africa Conference of Churches
- Pastor Peter Noteboom, General Secretary, Canadian Council of Churches
- Dr. Jørgen Skov Sørensen, General Secretary,

Conference of European Churches
- Jim Winkler, General Secretary, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. ■

MECC HERITAGE

Glimpses of MECC's Memories

“Muslims and Christians Together for the Sake of Al Quds”: A conference organized by the Middle East Council of Churches in collaboration with the Arab Group for Christian Muslim Dialogue, in June 1996 in Beirut.



A book issued by the Middle East Council of Churches to document the various speeches and interventions of the participants in the seminars of the meeting for Jerusalem.

From the media coverage of the meeting



مؤتمر مسلمون ومسيحيون معا من اجل القدس : لاسلطة في العالم تملك حق تهويد المدينة

القدس هي المدينة المقدسة التي جعلها الله حيا في كل زمان وحين، وهي التي جعلها الله حيا في كل زمان وحين، وهي التي جعلها الله حيا في كل زمان وحين... (The text continues with a detailed report on the conference, discussing the historical and religious significance of Jerusalem and the challenges it faces. It mentions the participation of various religious leaders and the importance of maintaining the city's status as a holy site for all faiths.)



اللقاء الإسلامي - المسيحي حول القدس : افتتح بمشاركة رجال دين من 10 دولة

افتتح اللقاء الإسلامي - المسيحي حول القدس في العاصمة القطرية الرياض بمشاركة رجال دين من 10 دول... (The article reports on the opening of the conference in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, highlighting the participation of religious leaders from ten different countries. It discusses the themes of the conference and the importance of dialogue between different faiths.)

وقال في ختام اللقاء... (The article concludes with a statement from one of the participants, emphasizing the need for continued dialogue and cooperation between Muslims and Christians to ensure the peace and stability of Jerusalem.)

DELEGATES - The Secretary-General of the Middle East Council of Churches Riyad Jarjour consults with the Saudi envoy.



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Churches censure Israel

The Middle East Council of Churches, in a statement issued Sunday, June 21, 2015, in a related development, the Accusation published in the Middle East Council of Churches... (This section provides an English translation of the conference's statement, where the churches express their strong disapproval of Israel's actions in Jerusalem, particularly the construction of the Temple Mount Forum, and call for an end to the occupation of the city.)

DELEGATES - The Secretary-General of the Middle East Council of Churches Riyad Jarjour consults with the Saudi envoy.

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