



مجلس كنائس الشرق الأوسط
The Middle East Council of Churches

Middle East Overview – July 2020

A Region Where There Is Only Suffering?



The moment the massive explosion took place at the seaport of Beirut, August 4, 2020, Photo Credit: LBCI



The Symbolic Hagia Sophia has been converted back into a mosque among International outrage, July 2020, photo credit: Hagia Sophia hurriyetdailynews.com

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1. Introduction

Due to the catastrophic event that rocked Beirut, the MECC has delayed posting this month's overview. As such, the council feels obliged to mention the massive explosion in Beirut Seaport, which inflicted more than 100 casualties, thousands injured, and irreparable damage to private and public property. A security source said that the blast resulted from an "explosion in a warehouse containing ammonium nitrate."

The same source said that these materials were confiscated years ago from a ship that had been damaged in the port of Beirut, "which prompted those in charge to transfer them to ward No. 12 in the port."¹

It occurred during a time, in which the country is struggling with the exponential increase in corona cases and a ransacked economy. In other words, the country, which has been saddled with corruption and governmental negligence, is finally imploding. The following pictures sum up the devastation that followed the country:



A cloud of deadly orange smoke which emanated from the reaction of chemical agents, August 4, 2020, photo credit: AFP



A picture of the aftermath of the explosion, August 4, photo credit: Reuters

¹ Annahar, August 4, 2020, <https://www.annahar.com/article/1249688>



A picture of the aftermath of the explosion, August 4, photo credit: Reuters

Another event also devastated the Middle East and the world: The Hagia Sophia, was reconverted into a mosque, while ignoring the massive criticism from the International community and organizations such as the UNESCO. The Middle East is already in tatters and suffering from sectarianism. Therefore, such a move seemed only to cause discord and hinder peace building in the region.

In response to Turkey’s actions, the MECC, along with His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew, Ecumenical Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox of Constantinople, His Holiness Pope Francis, and the World Council of Churches, who expressed their sadness, concern, and grief, raised the voice in defiance to this gross violation labeling the move as an assault on religious freedom laws and calling upon international bodies to act.



2. THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION

Egypt

- Uma Ramakrishnan, the IMF's mission chief for Egypt, claimed that she expects a decline in Egypt's economy due to the impact of the COVID-19.²
- According to the African Economic Outlook 2020, Egypt's GDP is expected to slow from 5.6% in 2019 to 2.2% in 2020.³
- According to Minister of Planning and Economic Development Hala Al-Saeed, investments exceeding LE 50 billion, have been pumped into the information and communication technology (ICT) sector, during the past 3 years.⁴
- The contraction of private investment, as discussed by Minister of Planning and Economic Development Hala el-Saeed, recorded LE 5.2 billion in 2020/2021 down from LE 7.3 billion in 2019/2020.⁵



Australian delegation filming film to attract tourism in Luxor, July 7, 2020, photo credit: Egypt Today.

² Ahram Online, July 10, 2020,

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/3/12/374140/Business/Economy/INTERVIEW-Egypt%E2%80%99s-economic-reforms-strengthened-th.aspx>

³ Zawya, July 8, 2020,

https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/economy/story/Egypt_economy_2020_to_grow_08_in_worst_case_scenario_African_Economic_Outlook-SNG_179120302/

⁴ Egypt Today, July 12, 2020, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/3/89557/Egypt-pumps-investments-exceeding-LE-50B-in-ICT-sector-during>

⁵ Egypt Today, July 7, 2020, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/3/89349/Egypt-s-investment-plan-for-tourism-records-LE5-2B-in>



- 16.022 EG/USD official currency exchange rate.⁶

Jordan

- Jordan Investment Commission (JIC) Chairman Khaled Wazani declared that 50 new ventures have been licensed and registered during the COVID-19 pandemic in various investment sectors.⁷
- The Jordan Investment Commission announced that in partnership with the Jordan Free and Development Zones Group (JFDZG) and the private and public sectors, it will launch its first virtual investment conference during the last quarter of 2020.⁸
- The capital bank of Jordan, signed a 70 million Euro agreement with the European Investment Bank, to support local small and medium-sized enterprises.
- The Jordanian government, through a statement from Prime Minister Omar al-Razzaz, promised to crack down on tax evasion in an attempt to secure funds for the economy.
- 1.428 USD Jordanian official currency value.⁹



Fifty new investment ventures have been licensed and registered during the COVID-19 pandemic in various investment sectors, according to the Jordan Investment Commission, July 1, 2020, photo credit: Jordan Times.

⁶ <http://www.cbe.org.eg/en/EconomicResearch/Statistics/Pages/ExchangeRatesListing.aspx>

⁷ Jordan Times, July 1, 2020, <https://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/50-new-investment-ventures-licensed-during-pandemic-%E2%80%94-jic>

⁸ JAawya, July 5, 2020,

https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/business/story/Jordan_Investment_Commission_to_launch_virtual_investment_conference_in_Q4_2020-SNG_178884421/

⁹ <http://statisticaldb.cbj.gov.jo/index?action=level4>



Iraq



Oil refinery plant in Iraq, June 15, 2020, photo credit: Reuters.

- Ali Allawi, the OPEC member's finance and deputy prime minister claimed that the IMF and the Iraqi government are in talks about a loan that would probably be a maximum of \$5 billion.¹⁰
- In a separate interview, he also claimed that the country needs to execute urgent reforms to escape from irreversible lows within next year.¹¹
- Iraq and Iran signed an agreement that guarantees the entry of 500 Iranian trucks into Iraqi territory through the Mandali crossing.¹²
- Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Ahmed Nasser Al-Sabah urged Iraq to solve its economic problem since his country is interested in in developing its relations with Iraq.¹³
- Iraqi Oil Minister Ihsan Abdul Jabbar Ismail and Saudi Minister of Energy Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman, convened to discuss cutting oil exports as a way to improve market stability¹⁴.

¹⁰ Bloomberg, July 1, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-07-01/iraq-seeks-imf-loan-saudi-investments-to-boost-battered-economy>

¹¹ The Arab Weekly, June 23, 2020, <https://the arabweekly.com/iraqi-finance-minister-warns-country-faces-existential-economic-situation>

¹² Tasnim News, July 13, 2020, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2020/07/13/2305486/iraq-to-allow-entry-to-500-iranian-trucks-weekly>

¹³ Middle East Monitor, July 15, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200615-kuwait-calls-on-iraq-to-resolve-economic-crisis/>

¹⁴ Arab News, July 13, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1704246/business-economy>



- 1,190.00 Dinar /USD Iraqi official currency exchange rate.¹⁵

Lebanon

- During this month the price of bread hiked up 2,000 pounds from its pre-October-crisis price of 1,500 pounds in the first such price change in eight years.¹⁶
- During this month, the Lebanese pound fluctuated between 6000 LL and 10,000 LL to the US dollar forcing several retailers to halt product distribution.
- According to J.P. Morgan, a US-based investment bank, the Lebanese economy after 2 years of recession will once again contract in 2021.¹⁷



A worker arranges Lebanese bread at a bakery in Beirut, Lebanon, April 17, 2012. Photo Credit: (The Daily Star/Hasan Shaaban)

- Negotiations between the IMF and the representatives of the Lebanese government were suspended. Reports claim that the IMF sees the Lebanese delegation were not serious about reform.¹⁸
- The IMF urged the Lebanese government on the 13th of July, to form a rescue plan so that not to delay recovery.¹⁹
- 1507.5 LBP/ USD Lebanon official currency exchange rate.²⁰

¹⁵ Central Bank of Iraq, May 10, 2020,

<http://www.cbiraq.org/DataValues.aspx?dtFrm=10/31/2003&dtTo=02/18/2019&tmlId=175&dtformat=MMM,yyyy>

¹⁶ Reuters, July 1, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-crisis-bread-prices/lebanese-government-raises-subsidised-bread-prices-as-currency-tumbles-idUSKBN2412YT>

¹⁷ Daily Star, June 15, 2020, <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/Business/Local/2020/Jun-15/507503-jp-morgan-lebanons-economy-to-contract-14-percent-in-2020.ashx>

¹⁸ Middle East Monitor, July 11, 2020, www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200711-negotiations-between-lebanon-government-and-imf-suspended/

¹⁹ Daily Star, July 13, 2020, <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/Business/Local/2020/Jul-13/508927-imf-urges-lebanese-to-unite-around-government-financial-rescue-plan.ashx>

²⁰ <http://www.bdl.gov.lb/>



Palestine



US Rep. Nita Lowey, D-N.Y., speaks in Washington, Jan 28, 2020, photo credit: Samuel Corum/Getty Images

- Palestine and Spain signed a memorandum of understanding on development and cooperation worth 112 million USD.²¹
- The Palestinian Authority with German support launched a tourism task force that will implement new protocols and standards, to mitigate the effects of corona.²²
- In an effort to support Palestine, The Democratic-held House submitted a bill for approval, to restore economic and humanitarian aid for the Palestinians to levels that slightly exceed the \$215 million in assistance the United States provided before President Donald Trump eliminated it.²³

²¹ Middle East Monitor, June 26, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200626-palestine-signs-112m-cooperation-deal-with-spain/>

²² Mena Fn, June 22, 2020, <https://menafn.com/1100370080/Palestine-With-German-support-Tourism-Recovery-Task-force-to-Launch-New-Protocols-and-Standards>

²³ Al Monitor, July 7, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/07/house-democrats-bid-restore-palestinian-aid-israel-lowey.html>



- According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), the first quarter of 2020 showed that Gross Domestic Product (GDP) decreased by 4.6% in the West Bank and by 6.1% in the Gaza Strip.²⁴

Syria

- The Syrian government announced that the price of sugar and rice have increased by 50% due to the devaluation of the currency.
- The Starting August 01, Syrians wishing to return home will have to sell USD 100 at the official exchange rate at the country's border crossings before they can enter their country.
- President Bashar al-Assad issued Legislative Decree no. 14 for 2020 on exempting production requirements and raw materials used in manufacturing pharmaceuticals for human use from customs.
- President Bashar al-Assad issued a legislative decree which stipulates for exempting subscribers to electrical power for agriculture purposes from all interests, fines, and other fees.²⁵
- The Qaboun industrial zone, a rare manufacturing zone within the capital's administrative boundaries, will be demolished and redeveloped as a residential and commercial district under Law No. 10.
- The government has issued a tender for investors to manage duty free outlets at the country's border crossings, after the closure of Rami Makhoul's company.²⁶
- The Syrian Grain Establishment (SGE) has invited grain traders to bid for the supply of 200,000 tons of soft milling wheat sourced from Russia.
- Official Current Exchange Rate SP/USD: 1250 - SP/USD-
Current Exchange Rate in Black Market: 2100 - SP/USD-
The average of exchange Rate in Black Market in July 2020: 2300 SP/USD.



Syrian pounds are pictured inside an exchange currency shop in Azaz, Syria. Photo Credit: Reuters.

²⁴ Wafa, June 30, 2020, <http://english.wafa.ps/page.aspx?id=QkRi3ua118582713282aQkRi3u>

²⁵ SANA, July 12, 2020, <http://www.sana.sy/en/?p=197027>



Cyprus



A Picture of a shipping dock in Cyprus, June 16, 2020, photo credit: Financial Mirror.

- According to George Mouskidis, president of the association of real estate owners, the share of foreign investors in real estate dropped by approximately 62 per cent during the first half of 2020 when compared to the same period in the previous year.²⁷
- Cyprus appointed its new shipping minister which is sought to improve the shipping industry which contributes 7% of the GDP.²⁸
- According to PwC Cyprus, the country is on the right track to recovery but still has further to go.²⁹
- In an attempt to improve the rating given to it by Moody's, Cyprus declared that it will attempt to raise 750 million Euros from the international markets.³⁰

²⁷ Cyprus Mail, July 13, 2020, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/07/13/cyprus-real-estate-sales/>

²⁸ Financial Mirror, July 10, 2020, <https://www.financialmirror.com/2020/07/10/new-cyprus-shipping-minister-at-the-helm/>

²⁹ Cyprus Mail, June 30, 2020, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/06/30/cyprus-economy-on-track-pwc/>

³⁰ Mondaq, July 13, 2020, <https://www.mondaq.com/cyprus/financing/964274/cyprus-government-seeks-to-raise-euro-750m-as-moody-raises-country-outlook-from-stable39-to-positive>



- 1. 0858 USD Euro official currency value³¹

3. The Corona Situation

Egypt

Corona cases, deaths and recovered are distributed as follows:

- 94,483 corona confirmed cases
 - 42,455 recovered
 - 4,865 deaths
- During July, Egyptians took to social media to express their disdain about the increasing number of COVID cases and asked the government to be better at presenting the actual number.³²
 - Dr. Hossam Hosni, head of the scientific committee overseeing the Corona treatment at the Ministry of Health and Population, confirmed that there is a decrease in the number of daily infections related to corona thanks to the continuation of the implementation of the current precautionary measures.³³
 - Khaled Abdel Ghaffar, Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Egypt, confirmed that there are 4 vaccines in Egypt to treat corona in the animal tests stage which achieved positive results.³⁴



A COVID response team treating a patient in one of the hospitals in Egypt, July 13 2020, photo credit: Youm 7

³¹ https://www.ecb.europa.eu/stats/policy_and_exchange_rates/euro_reference_exchange_rates/html/eurofxref-graph-usd.en.html

³² Foreign Policy, July 7, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/07/egypts-social-media-discovered-its-coronavirus-crisis/>

³³ Youm 7, July 13, 2020, <https://www.youm7.com/story/2020/7/13/>

³⁴ Al Bayan, July 12, 2020, <https://www.albayan.ae/one-world/arabs/2020-07-12-1.3909881>



Jordan

Corona cases, deaths and recovered are distributed as follows:

- 1,213 corona confirmed cases
 - 1,099 recovered
 - 11 deaths
-
- According to the JSF (Jordan Strategy Forum), the Kingdom’s “successful” anti-virus measures have resulted in minimizing the number of coronavirus cases.³⁵
 - Due to the effective measures implemented by the government, Jordan record no new domestic infections for a whole week.³⁶
 - The Jordanian King His Majesty Abdullah II, declared during a meeting with several Jordanian figures, that the COVID situation in under control and it is time to focus on the economy.³⁷



The Jordanian King His Majesty Abdullah II, July 12, 2020, photo credit: Sky News Arabia.

³⁵ Jordan Times, July 12, 2020, <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/jordans-anti-virus-measures-prove-%E2%80%98successful%E2%80%99-%E2%80%94jsf>

³⁶ Russia Today, July 13, 2020, https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/1134001

³⁷ Sky News Arabia, July 12, 2020, <https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1360467->



Iraq

Corona cases, deaths and recovered are distributed as follows:

- 129, 151 corona confirmed cases
 - 91,886 recovered
 - 4,868 deaths
- Iraqi doctors within this month repeatedly voiced their concerns about the crumbling health care system and their inability to treat high number of corona cases.³⁸
 - Iraq has begun allowing citizens to travel abroad under certain conditions despite the recent spike in coronavirus cases and fatalities in the country.³⁹
 - As corona cases increase, oxygen canisters numbers decrease within Iraq. This had led to several reports of people storming oxygen cylinder factories and hospitals to confiscate the canisters.⁴⁰



People wait for COVID-19 tests at a hospital in Baghdad on June 4, Photo credit: NPR.org

³⁸ <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/COVID-19%3A-Iraqi-doctors-near-collapse%3B-for-Fr-Paul%2C-the-situation-is-%27critical%27-50474.html>

³⁹ The National, July 10, 2020, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/coronavirus-iraq-permits-nationals-to-travel-abroad-1.1047130>

⁴⁰ NPR, July 1, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/01/885274646/in-iraq-rising-virus-cases-and-oxygen-shortages-stoke-outrage-fears-of-chaos>



Lebanon

Corona cases, deaths and recovered are distributed as follows:

- 4,885 corona confirmed cases
 - 1,795 recovered
 - 62 deaths
-
- During this month, the number of corona cases spiked to over 100 per day, causing panic among people and business owners over the rumored return of economically crippling measures.
 - Despite the increase in corona cases, the government the Ministry of Public Health claimed that it is ready for even worse scenarios.⁴¹
 - The Ministry of Public Health received from the Charge d'Affaires of the Brazilian Embassy, Jendera Ferrera dos Santos, a donation of equipment and personal protection worth 75,000 dollars.⁴²



Passengers will conduct a PCR upon their arrival at the Rafik Hariri International Airport “at the airline’s expense.” June 24, 2020, photo credit: AFP

⁴¹ Lebanon 24, July, 12, 2020, <https://www.lebanon24.com/news/lebanon/723486/>

⁴² <https://www.moph.gov.lb/en/Media>



Palestine

Corona cases, deaths and recovered are distributed as follows:

- 12,541 corona confirmed cases
- 5,390 recovered
- 84 deaths
- During July, the easing of restrictions led to a steady uptick in cases in the occupied West Bank.⁴³
- Minister of Health Mai Alkaila, warned the epidemiological situation of COVID-19 in the city of Hebron (south) has gone out of control, because it is spread in more than one episode of contacts.⁴⁴
- The Palestinian Center for Prisoners Studies announced that the Coronavirus will be more deadly among prisoners if it spreads among them, due to deliberate medical neglect.⁴⁵



The occupied West Bank has reported more than 3,700 cases since the outbreak began, July 5, 2020, Reuters.

Syria

Corona cases, deaths and recovered are distributed as follows:

- 122 corona confirmed cases
- 46 recovered
- 5 deaths
- The Government of Syria (GoS) continues to maintain a widespread easing of preventive measures.



Decontamination under way in Syria's North, July 12, 2020, photo credit: Alaraby.com

⁴³ Aljazeera, July 5, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/07/palestinians-israelis-face-lockdowns-coronavirus-surge-200705092454034.html>

⁴⁴ AA, July 5, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/>

⁴⁵ Almayadeen, July 14, 2020, [https://www.almayadeen.net/news/politics/1410299/-](https://www.almayadeen.net/news/politics/1410299/)



- The first death in medical staff in Syria was reported after the death of a surgeon working at the Syrian Red Crescent Hospital in Damascus.⁴⁶
- The Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) announced that six of its volunteers have been infected in Daraa after the first case was recorded in the same governorate last week. Moreover, at least 22 health care workers have been infected with COVID-19 at the national level.

Cyprus

Corona cases, deaths and recovered are distributed as follows:

- 1,150 corona confirmed cases
- 856 recovered
- 19 deaths
- The Cypriot Health Ministry expanded the list of countries which are allowed entry to island to 36.⁴⁷
- According to virologist Dr Peter Karayiannis, government adviser on the outbreak, coronavirus has not totally disappeared from the country, yet the situation is under control.⁴⁸



Citizens for 36 countries can now visit Cyprus, June 29, 2020, photo credit: Cyprus Mail.

⁴⁶ <https://syriadirect.org/ar/news/>

⁴⁷ Cyprus Mail, June 29, 2020, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/06/29/coronavirus-health-ministry-expands-number-of-countries-allowed-entry/>

⁴⁸ Financial Mirror, June 22, 2020, <https://www.financialmirror.com/2020/06/22/covid19-cyprus-has-not-seen-the-last-of-coronavirus/>



4. THE REFUGEE SITUATION (Updated)

Egypt

- According to the UNHCR, the number of Syrian refugees is 130,042 up until June 30, 2020.⁴⁹
- In addition to Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, the UNHCR asked donors to continue supporting refugees in Egypt.⁵⁰

Jordan

The UNHCR states that there are currently 658,028 registered refugees in Jordan up until the beginning of July.

The proportion of Syrian displaced people registered within the UNHCR for July, are distributed as follows:

- 193,974 in Amman Governorate (29.5 %)
 - 162,959 in Mafraq Governorate (24.8%)
 - 135,072 in Irbid Governorate (20.6%)
 - 95,609 in Zarqa Governorate (14.5%)
 - 18,515 in Balqa Governorate (2.8%)
 - 13,095 in Madaba Governorate (2%)
 - 9,300 in Jarash Governorate (1.4%)
 - 8,451 in Karak Governorate (1.3%)
 - 8,374 in Maan Governorate (1.3%)
 - 6,548 in Ajlun Governorate (1.0%)
 - 3,648 in Aqaba Governorate (0.6%)
 - 1,716 in Tafilah Governorate (0.3%)
- On July 6th WFP completed its July cash assistance of almost USD 13.5 million to 480,000 refugees living in communities across the 12 governorates and to refugees living in both Azraq and Za'atari camps. A staggered approach is still being used to transfer assistance to refugees living in camps to avoid overcrowding.
 - UNICEF and Dar Abu Abdullah partnered up to provide women and youth in Jordan with access to employment through the production of hundreds of thousands of non-medical face masks to

⁴⁹ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/1>

⁵⁰ Youm 7, June 30, 2020, <https://www.youm7.com/story/2020/6/30/>



support the national COVID-19 prevention response, as well as training in financial literacy and leadership.

- UNICEF and Digital Opportunity Trust formed a partnership to deliver digital skills to 750 young people aged 18 to 24 years living in vulnerable communities in Jordan this year.⁵¹

Iraq

The UNHCR states that there are currently 245,421 registered Syrian refugees in Iraq.

The proportion of displaced Syrian people registered within the UNHCR up until the beginning of July, are distributed as follows:

- 123,801 in Erbil (50.4%)
 - 87,330 in Dahuk (35.6%)
 - 31,193 in Sulaymaniyah (12.7%)
 - 1,141 in Anbar (0.5%)
 - 1,956 in other areas (0.8%)⁵²
- The International Organization for Migration (IOM), in support of and in partnership with the Government of Iraq, launched the first round of facilitated voluntary returns for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) on the 19th of July.
 - USAID contributed 6.25 million USD to United Nations World Food Program (WFP) to provide food assistance over three months for nearly 80,000 internally displaced Iraqis and 22,000 Syrian refugees.
 - According to Doctors Without Borders (MSF) refugees in Iraq are now extremely vulnerable to COVID-19 since they live in very unhygienic and dirty refugee camps.⁵³

Lebanon

Since the beginning of June, the number of registered refugees in Lebanon is 892256.

Refugees in Lebanon are distributed as follows:

- 339,233 in Bekaa (37.8%)
- 237,392 in North Lebanon (26.6%)

⁵¹ OCHA, Relief Web, reliefweb.com

⁵² <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/5>

⁵³ Voice of America, July 13, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/iraqi-refugees-extremely-vulnerable-covid-19-msf-says>



- 215,929 in Beirut (24.2%)
- 99,756 in South Lebanon (11.2%)⁵⁴

[Please note that the above section has not been updated by UNHCR Lebanon]

- Despite US warnings about forcing Palestinian refugees to leave the country, President Michel Aoun and former foreign minister Gebran Bassil, called on expelling them out of the country.⁵⁵
- A new inter-agency guidance on remote protection activities for vulnerable groups including elder persons, children at risk, children with disabilities, survivors of gender based violence (GBV), has been published during July.⁵⁶
- According to CARE, a Swiss NGO operating in Lebanon, some families in Lebanon are trading their children's toys for food.⁵⁷

Syria

- Hospitals, schools and homes have all been targeted during Syria's brutal and long-running conflict, said UN-appointed investigators, who on Tuesday 07 July condemned likely fresh war crimes committed by all parties.⁵⁸
- The Brussels conference on humanitarian aid to Syria managed to generate pledges of EUR 4.9 billion from donor countries, falling below both the funding needs of around EUR 7.7 billion and last year's pledges of EUR 6.1 billion. The United States was the only large donor to pledge a higher amount this year.⁵⁹
- During the 29 June Security Council videoconference meeting, experts warned that cases of COVID-19 are likely to spread "like wildfire" amid Syria's displaced millions — already suffering from hunger, spiking food prices and a health system decimated by war — while urging members to promptly renew the country's crucial cross-border aid mechanism amid the pandemic.⁶⁰
- In May 2020, the humanitarian community tracked about 56,000 IDP movements across Syria, which marks a decrease by almost fifty percent from the previous month.

⁵⁴ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71>

⁵⁵ Middle East Monitor, July 21, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200721-lebanon-politician-calls-for-expelling-palestine-refugees/>

⁵⁶ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/77650>

⁵⁷ Relief Web, July 15, 2020, www.reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/families-swapping-children-s-toys-food-covid-19-compounds-food-crisis-lebanon

⁵⁸ UN, July 7, 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/07/1067761>

⁵⁹ NY Times, June 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/30/world/europe/syria-aid-refugees-united-nations.html>

⁶⁰ UN, June 29, 2020, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14231.doc.htm>



- In May 2020, the humanitarian community tracked about 56,000 IDP movements across Syria, which marks a decrease by almost fifty percent from the previous month.⁶¹

Cyprus

- On the 9th of July, 30 Syrian refugees illegally entered North Cyprus where 2 of them were shot.⁶²
- Cyprus' interior ministry on the 24th of June, launched an investigation into the alleged sexual assault on girls in one of the refugee centers in the country.⁶³

⁶¹ OCHA, July 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/map/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-idp-spontaneous-returns-may-2020-entr>

⁶² Cyprus Mail, July 9, 2020, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/07/09/syrian-refugees-arrive-in-north-two-shot/>

⁶³ Ekathi Mirani, June 24, 2020, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/254011/article/ekathimerini/news/cyprus-probes-alleged-groping-of-girls-at-migrant-centre>



5. CHURCH ACTIVITIES

Egypt

- His Holiness Pope Tawadros II, head of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria ordained that only 25 people are allowed during masses to maintain social distancing.⁶⁴
- In follow up to what his Holiness instructed, the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria issued comprehensive memorandum on the regulations to be followed when churches are re-opened.⁶⁵
- His Holiness Pope Tawadros II and the Coptic Orthodox Church, held a mass to celebrate the end of the Apostles' Fast.⁶⁶



His Holiness Pope Tawadros II, June 28, 2020, photo credit: Egypt Today.

⁶⁴ Egypt Today, June 28, 2020, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/89061/25-people-allowed-to-enter-church-Pope-Tawadros-II>

⁶⁵ Egypt Today, June 28, 2020, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/89031/Egypt%E2%80%99s-Coptic-church-s-instructions-on-coexisting-with-COVID-19>

⁶⁶ Egypt Today, July 12, 2020, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/89578/Coptic-Orthodox-Church-celebrates-end-of-Apostles%E2%80%99-Fast>



Jordan

- The Royal Decree was issued, approving the decision of the Holy Synod headed by His Beatitude, Patriarch of the Holy City and all other works of Jordan and Palestine, Kyrius Kyrius Theophilos III. As such new judges were appointed. (refer to figure to the right).⁶⁷
- The Council of Church Presidents in Jordan issued a statement, rejecting and condemning the decision of the Israeli court to confiscate property that belongs to the church Orthodox Church in Bab al-Khalil, in the Old City of Jerusalem. It stressed its firm position, rejecting the inhuman stage of injustice on the holy lands and killing the last hope in making any peace process in the Middle East.⁶⁸

تشكيل هيئات جديدة في المحاكم الكنسية الأرثوذكسية (بداية وإستئناف)

صدرت الإرادة الملكية السامية بتعيين التالي اسماؤهم أعضاء إضافيين في محكمة الإستئناف الكنسية المنعقدة في الأردن

السيدة كريستين جورج
يشارة فضول

السيد فارس ياسر
سمعان هلسة

قدس الأب الإيكونوموس
بولس (ياجس) كفوف

قدس الأب الإيكونوموس
انطونيوس (عادل) العدنات

تعيين قاضياً ورئيساً هيئة لدى المحكمة الكنسية البدائية

السيد فارس توفيق جريس الداوود

تعيين التالي اسماؤهم عضوين إضافيين في المحكمة الكنسية البدائية في الأردن

قدس الأب يوسف الحمارة

قدس الأب الإيكونوموس
الكسيوس (ماهر) قافيتين

www.orthodoxjordan.org

New bodies were formed in the orthodox church, June 16, 2020, photo credit:Alghad

⁶⁷ <https://alghad.com/%D8%A5%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%84%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%AA%D8%B4%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%A6%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD/>

⁶⁸ Youm 7, July 4, 2020, <https://www.youm7.com/story/2020/7/4/>



Iraq



His Beatitude Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako, June 29, 2020 photo credit: Vatican News.

- His Beatitude Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako, Patriarch of Babylon of the Chaldeans and head of the Chaldean Catholic Church, received congratulations from Father Boulos Sati, The Patriarchal Administrator of the Chaldean church, for his second year as Patriarch.⁶⁹
- According to a recently published report by Aid to the Church in Need, 57% of Iraqi Christians surveyed claimed that they had considered emigration. Among them, 55% responded that they expect to leave Iraq by 2024. Moreover, ACN accused the international community of failing Christians.⁷⁰

Lebanon

- The Primate of the Orthodox Church of Antioch, HB Patriarch John X of Antioch and All the East, condemned the Turkish decision to convert Hagia Sophia into a mosque and expressed his solidarity with ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople.⁷¹
- HB Maronite Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, Cardinal Mar Bechara Boutros Al-Rahi, recommended Lebanon to stay neutral urging Lebanese to back away from conflicts in the region, to avoid further hunger and poverty.⁷²

⁶⁹ Dostor, June 29, 2020, <https://www.dostor.org/3131232>

⁷⁰ Catholic News Agency, July 7, 2020, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/life-after-isis-christians-are-leaving-iraq-due-to-ongoing-security-concerns-51594>

⁷¹ Lebanon 24, July 13, 2020, <https://www.lebanon24.com/news/lebanon/723679/>

⁷² Reuters, July 15, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-crisis/lebanon-must-stay-neutral-to-stave-off-poverty-patriarch-says-idUSKCN24G2JB>



- HB Patriarch Youssef el Absi, The Patriarch of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church convened with His Excellency President Michel Aoun to discuss his church's inability to hold the Synod due to the pandemic situation and that it was postponed. Moreover, he convened with the Jordanian and American ambassadors as two separate protocol meetings.



HB Patriarch Youssef el Absi in a meeting with the US ambassador, June 29, photo credit: El Nashra.

Palestine

- HE Atallah Hanna, Archbishop of Sebastia from the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, called on the Palestinian people not to raise the white flag and that “May God help the Palestinian people who endure the sufferings under coronavirus, unemployment and poverty.”⁷³
- As many as 13 church leaders from Jerusalem warned that the Israeli court's decision concerning the usurpation of the Greek Orthodox Church's property at Jaffa Gate threatens the Christian presence in the holy city.⁷⁴



Archbishop of Jerusalem's Greek Orthodox Church, Atallah Hanna [centre], seen during a protest in the West bank city of Hebron on 22 January 2015 [Muhesen Amren/Apalimages]

⁷³ Middle East Monitor, July 4, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200704-palestinians-will-not-raise-the-white-flag-says-palestine-archbishop-atallah-hanna/>

⁷⁴ Middle East Monitor, July 8, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200708-jerusalem-church-leaders-israel-threatening-christian-presence-in-the-city/>



Syria

- The Primate of the Orthodox Church of Antioch, HB Patriarch John X of Antioch and All the East, received his Holiness Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, to discuss general church affairs and the general situation.⁷⁵
- His Holiness Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church celebrated the Holy Qurobo at St. Peter and St. Paul Cathedral in Mor Aphrem Monastery in Maarat Saydnaya.⁷⁶
- Moreover, he held a meeting at the Syrian Private University of Antioch with the board of trustees to discuss precautionary measures being taken.⁷⁷



HB Patriarch John X and HH Mor Ignatius Aphrem II posing after discussions, July 10, 2020, photo credit: Almarkazia

⁷⁵ Al Markazia, July 10, 2020, <https://www.alkmarkazia.com/ar/news/show/233549/>

⁷⁶ <https://syriacpatriarchate.org/>

⁷⁷ Albawab H News, July 8, 2020, <https://www.albawabhnews.com/4077410>



Cyprus

- Primate of the Church of Cyprus, Archbishop Chrysostomos regarded Ankara's decision to turn Hagia Sophia into a mosque as a rude and uncivilized move. He also called upon all Christians to stand firmly together, despite their weakness, and defend what they still have.⁷⁸



Archbishop Chrysostomos, Primate of the Church of Cyprus, November 13, 2019, Photo Credit: orthodoxtimes.com

⁷⁸ Greek City Times, July 13, 2020, <https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/07/13/cypriot-archbishop-turks-remain-uncivilized-who-only-destroy-and-appropriate-the-cultures-of-others/>



6. MECC HEADQUARTERS ACTIVITIES

MECC's Official Condemnation of Turkey (July 11, 2020)



Hagia Sophia has fallen to Recep Tayeb Erdogan's political ambitions, July 11, 2020, photo credit: MECC website.

The Middle East Council of Churches: The Turkish Government's decision to convert the "Hagia Sophia" church into a mosque is Violation of religious freedom and coexistence

Following the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's signature on the Turkish Supreme Court's decision to transform the Hagia Sophia Church into a mosque, the Middle East Council of Churches issued a statement through its General Secretariat considering that this decision is an assault on religious freedom, the freedom that has become the cornerstone in international consciousness and that is protected by international laws. Therefore, the MECC calls for a decisive position from the United Nations and the League of Arab States by filing a legal appeal of the Turkish Supreme Court's decision to find justice based on the principles of religious freedom, as well as preserving the historical symbolism represented by the Church of "Hagia Sophia".



KAIROS Youth Consultation Meeting (July 11, 2020)



Youths from various denominations and backgrounds engaging in a discussion, July 11, 2020, photo credit: MECC website.

As part of the “Kairos Middle East Towards Churches Global Compact” process, the Theological and Ecumenical Department (TED) of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) organized the first youth consultation seminar on the 11th of July 2020, at the St Augustine center in Kafra – Ain Saade, Lebanon.

The youth consultation seminar, which was organized by the youth program coordinator in the Kairos Middle East process Sr. Emilie Tannous, revolved around the presence of Christian youth and their role in the Middle East region. It gathered 20 young people from the council’s member churches as well as 4 young employees working in the Communication and PR department and the Finance department of the council. In order to launch the consultation seminar, Father Gaby Hachem, director of the TED, Ziad El Sayegh, coordinator of the Kairos geopolitical process, and Fr Roupheal Zougheib, executive director and coordinator of the theological process, did a detailed presentation to demonstrate the MECC’s mission



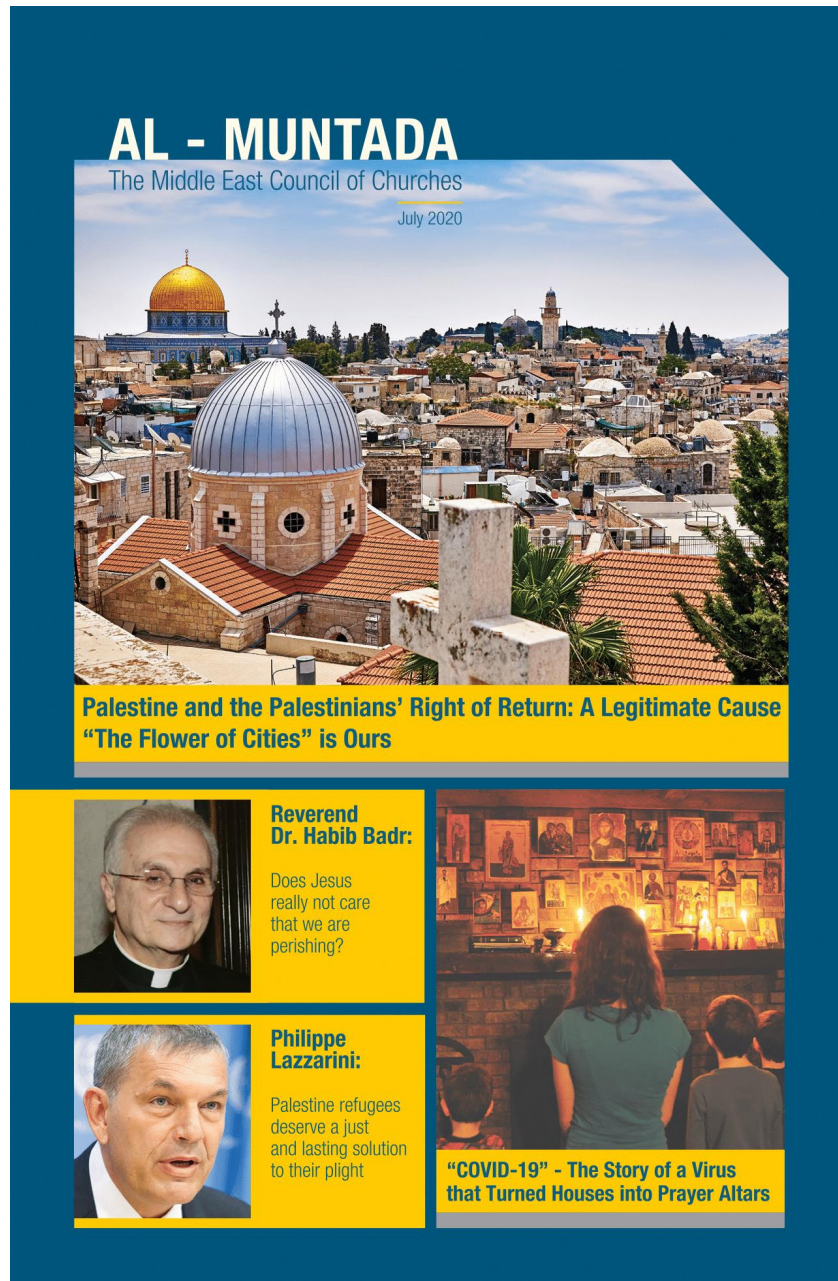
and the different phases of the Kairos process. Then, the participants were divided into two groups to discuss the geopolitical and theological contexts respectively.

The meeting revealed the enthusiasm of the youth and their excitement to actively participate in the process. In fact, as representatives of their churches, they were eager to express their concerns, fears and opinions in complete honesty and without constraints. They also focused on suggesting practical and applicable solutions that can encourage the youth to stay in their Middle Eastern countries and play an active role in their churches and consequently, in this wounded region. The discussions were truly rich in ideas, suggestions and creative solutions. During the entire seminar, the friendly ambiance among the youth led to beautiful human connections. In the last session, the participants gathered to draft recommendations that will be submitted to the drafting committee to be included in the final white paper, and will then be presented to the churches' presidents and official delegations in the upcoming MECC general assembly.

Since youth are a key pillar in the shaping of the future and in the strengthening of Christian presence in the cradle of Christianity, the Middle East, four additional youth consultation seminars will be held in Syria, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt during the summer, to examine the ideas and listen to the opinions of the youth in these different countries.



The New “Al Muntada” Magazine Issue, Published by the Middle East Council of Churches (July 29, 2020)



The new “Al-Muntada” issue magazine, July 2020, photo credit: MECC website.



The Communication and Public Relations Department of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) published a new issue of its periodic magazine, “Al-Muntada”, in July 2020, in Arabic and English. The issue focuses on two main topics: Jerusalem and the Palestinian refugees’ right of return, and the Middle East region’s approach in facing the Coronavirus pandemic.

The July issue features:

- The letter of Rev. Habib Badr, president of the National Evangelical Union in Lebanon and president of the council on behalf of the Evangelical family, entitled: Does Jesus really not care that we are perishing?
- A foreword by Dr Souraya Bechealany, MECC secretary general, entitled: Has Jerusalem city of Peace and prayer been sold for thirty pieces of silver?
- The call of the members of the MECC 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”

A feature file entitled: Palestine and the Palestinians’ Right of Return: A Legitimate Cause. “The Flower of Cities” is Ours

This file includes:

- An article by Metropolitan George Khodr entitled “The Man of Al Quds”
- An interview with Philippe Lazzarini, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), in which he insists on the fact that “Palestine refugees deserve a just and lasting solution to their plight”
- An article entitled “Palestine and its Refugees... An Ethical Compass!” written by Ziad Sayegh, expert in Palestinian affairs, where he draws a roadmap focusing on the just return of refugees.

This file also includes a special report on the MECC Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees, entitled “More than 60 years of service to safeguard the dignity of refugees... until they return to their land”.



It also comprises the joint letter of the World Council of Churches and the Middle East Council of Churches, appealing to the EU to take a firm stance against annexation by Israel of occupied Palestinian territory!

This issue of Al-Muntada also includes a special interview with Rev. Dr Olav Fyske Tveit, former secretary general of World Council of Churches (WCC) where he highlights that “The martyrdom and sacrifice of Eastern Christians remains a powerful inspiration for world Christianity”.

The second topic of the issue focuses on the top event during the current period, and is entitled: “In the Face of Covid-19: The Story of a Virus that Turned Houses into Prayer Altars”.

7. MECC Humanitarian activities July 2020

Lebanon

- Completed the distribution of food and non-food vouchers to 149 most vulnerable families – living below poverty line – in the Akkar area namely in the villages of Rahbe (50), Jdide (52) and Ayn Yaacoub (47).
- Continued distribution of medication particularly to elderly with chronic illnesses who rely on the latter at the end of every month.
- Continued partial cure to cancer patients through purchasing of medication and cycle treatments.
- Delivered 2 health awareness sessions to 18 women, on the importance of milk for infants and the importance of adequate nutrition for children while growing up.
- Held 2 sessions of Health Awareness on COVID-19 – prevention, precautions and symptoms for 24 women.
- Completed 18 sessions on Psychosocial support for 24 women, to deal with loneliness associated with the COVID-19 lockdown, GBV, and other trauma.
- Completed 6 sessions on psychosocial support for 12 children.
- Completed a total of 7 sessions on GBV awareness for 123 men.
- Completed 4 sessions on GBV awareness for 12 adolescents.
- Completed 18 sessions on soft skills for 24 women.
- Completed 4 sessions in a development program to empower 5 women.
- Completed life skills sessions in Sad al Bauchrieh (39 women: 23 Syrians, 9 Iraqis, 6 Lebanese 1 Turkish) and 18 in Nabaa (7 Syrians, 7Lebanese, 4 Iraqis)



Health Awareness Session (L) and GBV Session for men (R), July 2020, photo credit: Diakonia.



GBV sessions for youths and adolescents, July 2020, photo credit: Diakonia.



PSS and soft skill sessions for women and children, July 2020, photo credit: Diakonia.



Women empowerment session (L) and the distribution of food vouchers (R), July 2020, photo credit: Diakonia.

Syria

- Continued providing veterinary services to hundreds of cattle owner in Daraa governorate.
- Completed business startup course for 18 beneficiaries and start providing grants to restore the broken business of 12 skilled workers.
- Launched vocational training for 25 youth in Damascus rural under men hairdressing and sewing.
- Launched Crochet training course for 20 women in Damascus rural.
- Launched health awareness activity combined with distribution of hygiene kits to 1500 HH in Izraa and Daraa.



- Launched protection activities in Daraa governorate to target 500 HH with health and PSS consultations.
- Launched rehabilitation of five schools in Homs and Damascus rural.
- Launched health project to provide medication for cancer patients.
- Continued waste management activities in Izraa and Sheikh Maskin by hiring 100 workers under cash for work project.
- Completed the tender process to select suppliers to distribute food baskets and hygiene kits in Jaramana.
- Launched distribution of food baskets to 140 families in Aleppo.



Waste management activities in Izraa and Sheikh Maskin, July 2020, photo credit: Diakonia.



8. CONCLUSION

The Middle East is tattered in pain and suffering; every form of injustice or catastrophe has been bestowed upon it. From one hand, Erdogan's lust for regional hegemony has grown to new heights. Even with all of the disdain from the International community that followed the announcement of his move, Hagia Sophia fell victim to his motives. Nations did not even bat an eye or attempt to interfere, fearing that economic and diplomatic relations are at stake.

On the other hand, the massive explosion in Beirut demonstrates the ineffectiveness, the disdain, and utter carelessness of ME governments to carry out its bare duties. As a result, hundreds of lives were lost.

As such, the MECC calls on all friends and partners to help us and pray for us during this dark time; we have finally surpassed the threshold and can no longer tolerate the aftermath of such events.