



مجلس كنائس الشرق الأوسط
The Middle East Council of Churches

Middle East Overview – June 2020

Quiet Before the Storm?



While life gets back to normal, churches are reopening their doors, June 2020, Photo Credit: Xinhua

Headoffice

Beirut - Lebanon P.O. Box 11-5376

Tel: +961 1 353938 | Fax: +961 1 344896

info@mecc.org | www.mecc.org



Contents

1. BACKGROUND.....	2
2. THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION.....	3
Egypt.....	3
Jordan.....	4
Iraq.....	5
Lebanon.....	6
Palestine.....	7
Syria.....	8
Cyprus.....	9
3. THE Corona Situation.....	10
Egypt.....	10
Jordan.....	11
Iraq.....	11
Lebanon.....	12
Palestine.....	13
Syria.....	14
Cyprus.....	15
3. THE REFUGEE SITUATION (Updated).....	16
Egypt.....	16
Jordan.....	16
Iraq.....	17
Lebanon.....	18
Syria.....	18
Cyprus.....	18
4. CHURCH ACTIVITIES.....	20
5. MECC HEADQUARTERS ACTIVITIES.....	25
6. MECC Humanitarian activities June 2020:.....	31
7. CONCLUSION.....	34



1. Introduction

As economic and societal turmoil hit the ME countries, current political establishments which have exhausted national resources and which have manipulated local systems, are at the brink of imploding. For them to escape ruin, they have two options: Either to initiate a series of radical reforms or to give up their claim to the usurped 'throne'. Unfortunately, both options are nothing but wishful thinking from anyone dreaming of a better Middle East. Lessons learned from history suggest that corrupt rulers will overstay their welcome, while the rest of the middle and lower classes suffer in despair. Only when people have reached a certain threshold, societal deterioration and violence erupts.

MECC, just like the rest of the those concerned with humankind's dignity, has been perturbed by the gross violations of human rights and freedom of expression perpetuating throughout the region since decades. The council prays that current rulers alter their behavior and be more conscious of the misery people are suffering from.



2. THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION

Egypt

- Since many of the foreign investors have sold their T-bills (treasury bills) and bonds, Egypt offered two treasury bill bids worth EGP 6.5 billion.¹
- According to Deputy Minister of Finance Ahmed Kojak, major international companies operating in Egypt have confidence in the government's ability to overcome the coronavirus crisis.²
- For June, Moody's Investors Service placed Egypt B2 stable due to its large funding requirements and weak debt.³
- The country will resume exporting poultry exports after a 14-year hiatus following approval by the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE).⁴
- Minister of Planning and Economic Development Hala el Saeed claimed that Egypt will aim to boost investments in the higher education sector by 100 percent and IT sector by 300 percent.⁵
- 16.2275 EG/USD official currency exchange rate.⁶



The Egyptian Central Bank offices in Cairo, Egypt, June 2020, Photo credit: Reuters.

¹ Ahram Online, June 15, 2020,

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/3/12/372170/Business/Economy/Egypt%E2%80%99s-central-bank-offers-EGP--bln-Tbills.aspx>

² Egypt Today, June 10, 2020, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/3/88467/Finance-Ministry-reviews-int%E2%80%99l-institutions-trust-in-Egypt%E2%80%99s-economy>

³ Egypt Today, June 10, 2020, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/3/88468/Moody-s-reviews-impact-of-COVID-19-on-Egypt-s>

⁴ Ahram, June 14, 2020, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/372115/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-to-resume-poultry-export-after-year-hiatus-A.aspx>

⁵ Egypt Today, June 5, 2020, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/3/88325/Int-l-institutions-forecast-positive-growth-rate-for-Egypt-s>

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



Jordan

- The World Bank agreed to allocate a \$100 million financial assistance package to increase Jordanians' and Syrian refugees' access to jobs and create better work conditions for them.⁷
- To fight corruption, Jordan's government revealed new legal measures and efforts to gather taxes and prevent evasion.⁸
- Minister of Finance Mohamad Al-Ississ assured the media that although there will be new tax regulations, there will be no tax increase.⁹
- During a meeting with local media figures, His Majesty King Abdullah stressed the importance of quick economic recovery from the impact of the coronavirus disease.¹⁰
- 1.428 USD Jordanian official currency value.¹¹



New moves against corruption and tax evasion, were announced by Jordan's Government on June 14, 2020. Photo Credit: AFP

⁷ Zawya, June 13, 2020,

https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/economy/story/WB_approves_100mIn_in_support_for_Syrians_host_communities_in_Jordan-SNG_177004496/

⁸ The National, June 14, 2020, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/jordan-expands-powers-of-anti-corruption-agency-1.1033627>

⁹ Zawya, June 14, 2020,

https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/business/story/Middle_East_Africa_renewable_energy_investments_slip_8_in_2019_report-SNG_177060909/

¹⁰ Zawya, June 8, 2020,

https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/economy/story/Jordans_king_stresses_importance_of_quick_economic_recovery_from_COVID19-SNG_176477777/

¹¹ <http://statisticaldb.cbj.gov.jo/index?action=level4>



Iraq

- Since security tensions within Iraq has eased, US has decided to reduce its number of military forces deployed in the country, during a new round of strategic talks. Moreover, the US promised it will economically aid Iraq.¹²
- In tandem with the previous point, US State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortagus claimed that the US wants to move into a 'new era' with Iraq, and foster greater economic investment.¹³
- In a new report released by the IOM (International Organization for Migration), sales went down by 71% and employment reduced by 40% across all economic sectors.¹⁴
- According Finance Minister Ali Allawi, Iraq's newly formed government will aim to 'open a new page' with Arabian Gulf countries to attract capital inflows from the region.¹⁵
- Iraq's Finance Ministry declared that it will seek to remove red tape and lift restrictions to create a streamlined investment environment in Iraq.¹⁶
- Starting in June, Iraq decided to export 2.8 million barrels of oil per day on average, as stated by the oil ministry.¹⁷
- 1,27 Dinar /USD Iraqi official currency exchange rate.¹⁸



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

¹² France 24, June 12, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200612-usa-iraq-troop-withdrawal-mustafa-al-kadhimi>

¹³ Rudaw, June 13, 2020, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/interview/13062020>

¹⁴ <http://edf.iom.int/Content/Cov19/IOM%20Iraq%20Impact%20of%20COVID-19%20on%20Small%20and%20Medium-Sized%20Enterprises%20in%20Iraq.pdf>

¹⁵ Alkhaleej Today, June 8, 2020, <https://alkhaleejtoday.co/international/5003382/Iraq-Gulf-ties-Baghdad-aims-to-address-investment-concerns.html>

¹⁶ The National, June 8, 2020, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/ali-allawi-iraq-must-cut-red-tape-to-do-business-with-gulf-1.1030634>

¹⁷ Anadolu Agency, June 15, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/iraq-to-boost-oil-exports-to-28m-barrels-daily-in-june/1877822>

¹⁸ Central Bank of Iraq, May 10, 2020, <http://www.cbiraq.org/DataValues.aspx?dtFrm=10/31/2003&dtTo=02/18/2019&tmId=175&dtformat=MMM,yyyy>



Lebanon

- Violent protests erupted in Lebanon over the dwindling socio-economic conditions and the increasing dollar shortage.¹⁹
- Lebanese media reported that the exchange rate had tumbled to 8,000 per dollar on the black market, marking a new low for the LBP.²⁰
- According to J.P. Morgan, a US-based investment bank, the Lebanese economy after 2 years of recession will once again contract in 2021.²¹
- To attempt to curb the social unrest the government decided to inject dollars from the central bank to the Lebanese Market.
- The US issued the Caesar Act which has started to inflict pressure on Lebanon's already battered economy and on its relationship with Syria.²²
- 1507.5 LBP/ USD Lebanon official currency exchange rate.²³



Image of a peaceful protest in Lebanon, hours before turning into a violent one, June 7, 2020, photo credit: Aljazeera.

¹⁹ Aljazeera, June 7, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/pictures-protest-erupts-lebanon-economic-woes-200607073800304.html>

²⁰ Aljazeera, June 13, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/06/lebanon-protesters-call-gov-resign-economic-crisis-200613172445502.html>

²¹ 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>

²² Daily Star, June 8, 2020, <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2020/Jun-08/507111-us-sanctions-law-adds-to-lebanons-woes-threatens-to-hurt-economy.ashx>

²³ <http://www.bdl.gov.lb/>



Palestine

- The Palestinian Authority did not pay wages for around 155,000 public employees during the previous month due to the dire state of its economy.²⁴
- The Palestinian Authority refused funds coming from Israel, thus facing a major fiscal deficit.²⁵
- In an effort to support Palestine's economy and the development of its institutions, France agreed to contribute 8.9 million USD.²⁶
- An Economic Empowerment Fund was launched in which the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) Group contributed \$100 million, Islamic Solidarity Fund for Development (ISFD) contributed \$52 million, and the Al-Aqsa Fund followed suit with a contribution of \$13 million.²⁷



Jerusalem, Palestine, Photo Credit: albwaba.com

²⁴ Arab News, June 10, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1687406/middle-east>

²⁵ Albawaba, June 15, 2020, <https://www.albwaba.com/news/palestinian-authority-tells-israel-pay-and-stop-using-taxes-arms-twist-them-1362589>

²⁶ Middle East Monitor, June 3, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200603-france-grants-8-9m-to-support-palestine-economic-efforts/>

²⁷ Alkhaleej Today, June 16, 2020, <https://alkhaleejtoday.co/business/5007000/Economic-Empowerment-Fund-launched-for-the-Palestinian-people.html>



Syria

- The Syrian pound plummeted to a new Historic Low, to reach approximately 3500 Syrian pounds per dollar in the black market and is expected to continue its fall as U.S. after administered sanctions take effect under the recently passed Caesar Act.
- The Syria's central bank devalued the official exchange rate from 704 to 1,256 Syrian pounds to the dollar on Wednesday 17 June, giving in to weeks of depreciation on the black market as new US sanctions took effect.²⁸
- In a new report by the New Humanitarian, several shops and pharmacies are keeping their doors shut because the value of the currency is dropping too fast for traders to set prices.
- The price rises of essentials including food, cooking gas, bread, and sugar – combined with increasingly low wages – are leading to public alarm and anger.²⁹
- The UN has warned that some 40,000 hectares of land (400 square kilometres) have burned in live conflict areas near active front lines in Syria – some of them caused by warfare – Fires are ruining large areas of cropland, putting the food insecurity and livelihoods of millions of civilians at increasing risk.³⁰
- The withdrawal of a Lebanese company from the market has suspended the ATM networks of most private banks operating in the country.³¹
- Official Current Exchange Rate SP/USD: 1250 - SP/USD -
- Current Exchange Rate in Black Market: 2700 - SP/USD-
- The average of exchange Rate in Black Market in June 2020: 2800 SP/USD.



A merchant counts Syrian pound notes, bearing a portrait of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, at the Bzourieh market in the centre of the Syrian capital Damascus on 11 September 2019, photo credit: Middle East Monitor.

²⁸ Middle East Online, June 17, 2020, <https://middle-east-online.com/en/syria-devalues-pound>

²⁹ The new humanitarian, June 9, 2020, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2020/06/09/Syria-economic-crisis-currency-exchange-rate-crash-us-sanctions>

³⁰ The new humanitarian, 7 June

³¹ The Syria report, 17 June



Cyprus

- Cyprus introduced tougher anti-money laundering checks in its "golden passports" program, under which it gives citizenship to foreigners who invest large sums in the east Mediterranean country.³²
- According to Finance Minister Constantinos Petrides, the Cypriot economy has entered into its recovery phase.³³
- Despite its progress towards a digital economy and society, Cyprus ranked fifth to last in this year's digital economy and society index (DESI).³⁴
- 1.0858 USD Euro official currency value³⁵



Cyprus resuming normal economic activity. June 2, 2020, Photo Credit: Cyprus Mail.

³² The National Herald, June 10, 2020, https://www.thenationalherald.com/cyprus_economy/arthro/cyprus_tightens_rules_for_passport_for_cash_scheme-424303/

³³ Financial Mirror, June 2, 2020, <https://www.financialmirror.com/2020/06/02/covid19-cyprus-economy-enters-recovery-mode/>

³⁴ Cyprus Mail, June 12, 2020, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/06/12/cyprus-ranks-fifth-to-last-on-digital-economy-index/>

³⁵ https://www.ecb.europa.eu/stats/policy_and_exchange_rates/euro_reference_exchange_rates/html/eurofxref-graph-usd.en.html



3. The Corona Situation

Egypt

Corona cases, deaths and recovered are distributed as follows:

- 69,814 corona confirmed cases
- 6,810 recovered
- 3,034 deaths

- During June, Egypt recorded the highest number of new cases in one day, signaling worsening conditions as the country opens up its economy.³⁶

- Egypt's doctors' association claimed at least 68 Egyptian doctors have died of coronavirus, and 430 tested positive since the start of the pandemic.³⁷

- Egyptian Minister of Civil Aviation Mohamed Manar Enabah stated that each passenger coming to Egypt will be required to provide a PCR coronavirus test certificate certifying that they are not infected with the virus.³⁸



Stricter measures will be applied on inbound flights, June 16, 2020, Photo Credit: Egypt Independent

³⁶ The National, June 16, 2020, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/coronavirus-egypt-faces-record-rise-in-worst-month-so-far-1.1034376>

³⁷ Anadolu Agency, June 16, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/latest-on-coronavirus-outbreak/coronavirus-has-killed-68-doctors-in-egypt/1878907>

³⁸ Egypt Independent, June 16, 2020, <https://egyptindependent.com/egypt-to-require-visitors-to-provide-pcr-coronavirus-test-certificate-official/>



Jordan

Corona cases, deaths and recovered are distributed as follows:

- 1,133 corona confirmed cases
 - 886 recovered
 - 9 deaths
-
- On the 6th of June, Jordan eased the restrictions while reopening 90% of the economy as daily coronavirus cases decreased.³⁹
 - EU adopted a funding package of 20.1 million euros to mitigate the effect of the pandemic on Syrian families in Jordan.⁴⁰
 - In a recent study by Jordan Labour Watch, the coronavirus situation increased child labor within Jordan due to the increase in poverty.⁴¹



Jordanian teenagers work at a stone cutting workshop in the industrial area of Sahab, 40 kms south of Amman, December 22, 2008. Photo Credit: AFP

Iraq

Corona cases, deaths and recovered are distributed as follows:

- 51,524 corona confirmed cases
- 26,267 recovered
- 2,050 deaths

³⁹ Anadolu Agency, June 4, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/jordan-to-reopen-economy-ease-lockdown-from-june-6/1865299>

⁴⁰ OCHA, June 11, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/eu-adopts-55-million-support-package-syrian-refugees-and-local-communities-jordan-and>

⁴¹ Arab News, June 14, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1689601/middle-east>



- Iraq registered the biggest 24-hour increase (1006) in Covid-19 cases since the beginning of the crisis in February, according to new figures from the Ministry of Health.
- Doctors in Iraq during June repeatedly expressed fears that the country's health-care system may be unable to cope with a major increase in cases.
- The Health Ministry re-emphasised the importance of citizens adhering to guidelines to prevent the spread of the virus.⁴²



Picture of overcrowded hospital in Iraq. April 2, 2020, Photo Credit: Medecins Sans Frontieres.

Lebanon

Corona cases, deaths and recovered are distributed as follows:

- 1,788 corona confirmed cases
 - 1,223 recovered
 - 34 deaths
- The government on the 14th of June decided to end the measure that required citizens to use commercial cars based on odd and even plate numbers.
 - The government took a decision to open the airport on the 1st of July, with a 10% operational capacity.



Lebanon is currently witnessing a decreasing number of new corona cases, June 14, 2020, photo credit: Naharnet.

⁴² Middle East Eye, June 5, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraq-records-more-1000-daily-coronavirus-infections-first-time>



- The Ministry of Interior under Circular No. 57 gave businesses the freedom to set its own work schedule. Yet under the same circular, pubs, night clubs, amusement centers, kids parks, video game shops etc.. remain closed.

Palestine

Corona cases, deaths and recovered are distributed as follows:

- 2,978 corona confirmed cases
- 460 recovered
- 8 deaths
- The World Bank warned that the corona virus may force the Palestinian economy to contract by 11% in 2021.⁴³
- Minister of Health Mai Alkaila, warned that Palestine could be on the way to a second wave of coronavirus pandemic.⁴⁴
- A team of Chinese medical experts arrived to Palestine to assist it in its fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁵



Chinese medical team members attend a meeting with Palestinian health officials in the West Bank city of Ramallah, June 11, 2020, Photo credit: Nobani/Xinhua

⁴³ Mena Fn, June 2, 2020, <https://menafn.com/1100261172/Palestine-economy-could-shrink-by-11-World-Bank>

⁴⁴ Wafa, June 16, 2020, <http://english.wafa.ps/page.aspx?id=cESUDTa117443464941acESUDT>

⁴⁵ Xinhuanet, June 11, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/11/c_139132022.htm



Syria

Corona cases, deaths and recovered are distributed as follows:

- 312 corona confirmed cases
 - 113 recovered
 - 9 deaths
-
- Due to the preventive measures of COVID-19 and the exchange rate, an increase in the prices of most basic commodities has been observed.
 - Due to the volatility of exchange rate and prices, some humanitarian workers operating in Syria have suspended their local procurement.⁴⁶
 - WHO supported MoH with a tobacco control program in the context of COVID-19 awareness campaign, including distribution of IEC and a 4 June workshop for 25 health educators.



Syrian refugees Mustafa and Sherin stand with two of their children, Nadia, 12, and Muhammad, 10, outside their home in Amman during the COVID-19 lockdown. They fled Damascus in 2013. June 16, 2020, photo credit: UNHCR.

⁴⁶ UNHCR, June 16, 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2020/6/5ee884fb4/syrian-refugees-profoundly-hit-covid-19-economic-downturn.html>



Cyprus

Corona cases, deaths and recovered are distributed as follows:

- 944 corona confirmed cases
 - 790 recovered
 - 17 deaths
- Cyprus declared its victory over Corona after recording no or low number of new cases per day in June.
 - Cyprus reopened airports while placing strict measure on visiting tourists.⁴⁷
 - Cabinet approved the implementation of a set of measures to support the economy until October in light of the coronavirus pandemic budgeted at €150 million.⁴⁸



The cabinet's meeting to approve the new set of measures, June 17, 2020, Photo Credit: Cyprus Mail.

⁴⁷ The National Herald, June 9, 2020, https://www.thenationalherald.com/cyprus_economy/arthro/cyprus_airport_opens_tourists_face_covid_19_measures-423444/

⁴⁸ Cyprus Mail, June 17, 2020, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/06/17/coronavirus-new-schemes-for-economic-recovery-worth-e150m/>



4. THE REFUGEE SITUATION (Updated)

Egypt

- According to the UNHCR, the number of Syrian refugees is 130,045 up until April 30, 2020.⁴⁹
- The WFP provided food assistance to about 113,000 refugees and asylum seekers to alleviate the impact of COVID-19 on the food security and livelihoods of refugees. Moreover, the WFP extended nutrition support to non-Syrian refugee pregnant and lactating women, reaching about 4,000 women and their infants under 2 years of age with unconditional cash assistance.⁵⁰

Jordan

The UNHCR states that there are currently 657,287 registered refugees in Jordan up until the beginning of June.

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

- 193,865 in Amman Governorate (29.5 %)
 - 162,697 in Mafraq Governorate (24.8%)
 - 134,959 in Irbid Governorate (20.6%)
 - 95,396 in Zarqa Governorate (14.5%)
 - 18,572 in Balqa Governorate (2.8%)
 - 13,073 in Madaba Governorate (2%)
 - 9,281 in Jarash Governorate (1.4%)
 - 8,449 in Karak Governorate (1.3%)
 - 8,364 in Maan Governorate (1.3%)
 - 6,544 in Ajlun Governorate (1.0%)
 - 3,648 in Aqaba Governorate (0.6%)
 - 1,716 in Tafilah Governorate (0.3%)
- The Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) declared its support to UNICEF's COVID-19 appeal to help vulnerable children in Jordan stay protected.⁵¹

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

⁵⁰ OCHA, June 24, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/egypt/wfp-egypt-country-brief-may-2020>

⁵¹ OCHA, June 14, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/koica-supports-unicef-s-covid-19-appeal-children-jordan>



- According to the latest Multi-Sectoral Rapid Needs Assessment jointly conducted by WFP, UNICEF, and UNHCR in Jordan, 41 per cent of all respondents witnessed a negative impact on their children's well-being due to the COVID-19 crisis and curfew.⁵²
- Community Jameel and the International Rescue Committee have recently started collaborating together to assist refugees in resisting COVID-19.⁵³

Iraq

The UNHCR states that there are currently 247,247 registered Syrian refugees in Iraq.

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

- 124,572 in Erbil (50.4%)
 - 88,328 in Dahuk (35.7%)
 - 31,307 in Sulaymaniyah (12.7%)
 - 1,140 in Anbar (0.5%)
 - 1,900 in other areas (0.8%)⁵⁴
- Australia donated 866,000 AUD to support the work of UNFPA in Iraq and to fund efforts to assist 38,000 women and girls, in Duhok and Nineveh Governorates.⁵⁵
 - The International Labor Organization (ILO) and the UNHCR expressed their worries about increased child labor due to the covid-19 pandemic.⁵⁶
 - The Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) contributed 1.73 million USD to UNFPA, to protect pregnant women, survivors of gender-based violence, women and girls.⁵⁷

⁵² <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/77112.pdf>

⁵³ Rescue, June 15, 2020, <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/community-jameel-and-international-rescue-committee-join-forces-combat-effects-covid>

⁵⁴ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/5>

⁵⁵ Relief Web, June 14, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/australia-contributes-aud-866000-unfpa-refugee-interventions-iraq-enar>

⁵⁶ Relief Web, June 12, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/joint-statement-ilo-and-unicef-world-day-against-child-labour-iraq-enar>

⁵⁷ Relief Web, June 12, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/sida-funds-unfpa-covid-19-response-us-173-m>



Lebanon

Since the beginning of June, the number of registered refugees in Lebanon is 892,256.

Refugees in Lebanon are distributed as follows:

- 339,233 in Bekaa (37.8%)
 - 237,392 in North Lebanon (26.6%)
 - 215,929 in Beirut (24.2%)
 - 99,756 in South Lebanon (11.2%)⁵⁸
- A private television station called Al-Jadeed TV accused successive Lebanese governments of massive misuse of donor funds for refugee education in Lebanon, via an accurate report called “Schools of Sand”.⁵⁹
 - 1,000 displaced Syrians stranded at the Lebanon-Syria borders, due to their attempt to flee the deplorable living conditions in Lebanon, were rescued by a UNHCR team based in Lebanon.⁶⁰
 - According to a survey launched by the WFP (World Food Program), 61 percent of women lost their jobs due to COVID-19 compared to 46 percent of Syrian men.⁶¹

Syria

- The UN’s top aid official has urged the Security Council to renew a mechanism that provides lifesaving assistance in northwest Syria, through cross-border deliveries from Turkey.⁶²
- WHO airlifted over 80 tons of emergency medical supplies from Iraq to meet the increasing health needs in north east Syria.⁶³
- On June 30, the United Nations and European Union co-chaired the fourth Brussels Conference on Supporting Syria and the Region, via a virtual conference that brought world leaders together to discuss how to respond to the crisis in Syria.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71>

⁵⁹ Fanar, June 11, 2020, <https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2020/06/report-alleges-gross-misuse-of-donor-funds-for-refugee-education-in-lebanon/>

⁶⁰ Xinhua Net, June 18, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/18/c_139149477.htm

⁶¹ Relief Web, June 17, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/assessing-impact-economic-and-covid-19-crises-lebanon-june-2020>

⁶² UN June 19, 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/05/1064432>

⁶³ OCHA, June 14, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/who-airlifts-over-80-tons-emergency-medical-supplies-iraq-meet>

⁶⁴ Ocha, June 30, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/world-leaders-should-not-give-education-syrian-refugee-children>



- Following discussions between the Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) group and WASH Cluster, partners are collaborating to distribute 720,000 food parcels with soap, including 420,000 with COVID-19 stickers, instead of the in-person distribution of brochures.
- UNICEF launched entertainment activities and is supporting safety vans in various governorates to deliver awareness messages to some 157,000 children and their families.
- According to a report by OCHA, only 17% of children and mothers who need treatment for acute malnutrition were reached by the WHO.⁶⁵

Cyprus

- Trade union Peo and other left-wing movements urged people to join a protest showing solidarity with refugees on the occasion of the World Refugee Day.⁶⁶
- Nicos Nouris, Cyprus' interior minister, stressed the importance of forging a common migration policy that obligates member states to take in a proportional number of asylum-seekers and restricts EU funding access to any country that refuses.⁶⁷
- Due to the sizable number of refugees heading to Cyprus, authorities started a multilingual SMS campaign to stop migrants from believing that the island nation is a gateway to the European Union.⁶⁸
- Representatives of refugees and asylum seekers convened with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (Unhcr) representative in Cyprus Katja Saha, to discuss the difficulties migrants face in integrating into Cypriot society.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ OCHA, June 6, 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/covid-19_update_no.6.pdf

⁶⁶ Cyprus Mail, June 18, 2020, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/06/18/refugee-solidarity-demo-planned-for-friday/>

⁶⁷ Star Tribune, June 18, 2020, <https://www.startribune.com/cyprus-says-common-eu-migration-deal-imperative/571345512/>

⁶⁸ Neo Kosmos, June 1, 2020, <https://neoskosmos.com/en/166720/cyprus-launches-multilingual-sms-blitz-to-prevent-migrant-arrivals/>

⁶⁹ Cyprus Mail, June 2, 2020, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/06/02/teleconference-between-refugees-and-unhcr-highlights-serious-issues-in-cyprus/>



5. CHURCH ACTIVITIES

Egypt

- According to Head of the Evangelical community in Egypt Andrea Zaki, a special committee was formed to prepare for the reopening of the churches while adhering to anti- COVID 19 measures.⁷⁰
- Due to the sudden rise of COVID-19 cases Egypt's Coptic Orthodox Church claimed it will extend the suspension of prayer until June 27.⁷¹
- Since that there are many troubled Christians in the world who have no one to remember them, His Holiness Pope Tawadros II, head of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, demanded that we pray for Christians throughout the world, so that God graces them with love, patience, endurance and protection.⁷²



His Holiness Pope Tawadros II head of the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church, June 1, 2020, Photo Credit: Reuters.

⁷⁰ Egypt Today, May 30, 2020, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/88140/Committee-formed-to-prepare-plan-for-reopening-evangelical-churches-in>

⁷¹ Ahram, June 27, 2020, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/370160/Egypt/Politics-/Egypts-Coptic-Orthodox-Church-extends-suspension-o.aspx>

⁷² El Balad, June 18, 2020, <https://www.elbalad.news/4368415>



Jordan

- Churches in Jordan have reopened their doors to masses while maintaining social distancing, after a 3-months lockdown.
- On Sunday, June 7, Holy Masses were celebrated in many churches throughout the Kingdom. Greek Orthodox Archbishop Christoforos Atallah celebrated Mass at the Master's Entry into the Temple Church marking the Feast of Pentecost, while Bishop Joseph Jbarah celebrated Mass at the Greek Catholic St George Cathedral, and Latin Patriarchal Vicar for Jordan Bishop William Shomali celebrated Mass at the Church of the Messengers in Northern Zarqa.⁷³



A Jordanian Catholic wearing a face mask attends a Mass at a Catholic church in Amman, Jordan, June 6, 2020, Photo Credit: Xinhua)

Iraq

- His Beatitude Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako, Patriarch of Babylon of the Chaldeans and head of the Chaldean Catholic Church, in a letter to the faithful, called them to seize the opportunity of COVID-19 and deepen their faiths.⁷⁴
- The Chaldean Patriarchate in Iraq, on the 17th of June, issued a statement calling on all believers to resume staying at home and



His Beatitude Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako and members of the Chaldean Patriarchate in Iraq, June 17, 2020, photo credit: Albawaba News.

⁷³ IndCatholic News, June 8, 2020, <https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/39762>

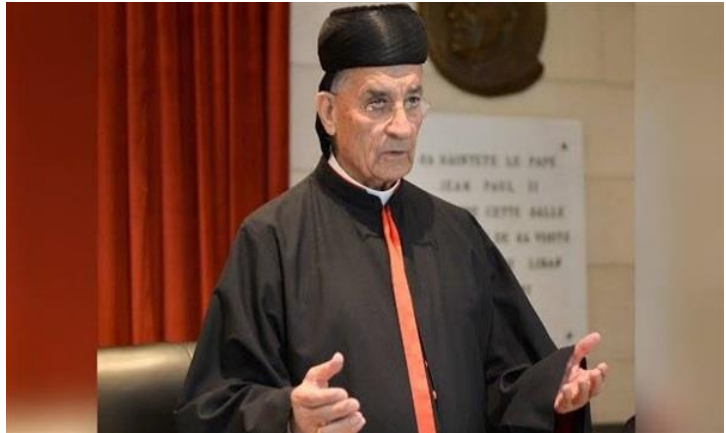
⁷⁴ Asia News, June 15, 2020, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Card-Sako:-COVID-19-is-opportunity-for-a-deeper-faith-and-a-more-caring-society-50346.html>



to wear protective masks when commuting outside.⁷⁵

Lebanon

- HB Maronite Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, Cardinal Mar Bechara Boutros Al-Rahi, during a Sunday mass urged the government to listen to the people and to initiate a reform plan aiming to gain their confidence and restore the country.
- HB Patriarch Youssef el Absi, The Patriarch of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, made a surprise visit to the ecclesiastical school of St. Hanna in Reyak, where he was updated about the construction and restoration works taking place at the site.⁷⁶



Cardinal Mar Bechara Boutros Al-Rahi, during a Sunday Mass, June 14, 2020, Photo Credit: Albawaba News

Palestine

- HE Atallah Hanna, Archbishop of Sebastia from the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, called on the Palestinian people and the Arab and Islamic nation to adhere to the principles established by the late Dr. Ramadan Abdullah Shallah, which calls for unity in the face of the Israeli enemy.⁷⁷

HE Atallah Hanna, June 19, 2020, photo credit: Alwatan Voice



⁷⁵ Albawaba H News, June 17, 2020, <https://www.albawabhnews.com/4054092>

⁷⁶ El Nashra, June 4, 2020, <https://www.elnashra.com/news/show/1418029/>

⁷⁷ Alwatan Voice, June 19, 2020, <https://www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/news/2020/06/19/1345902.html>



- HE Atallah Hanna denounced the targeting of the Islamic ambulance cemetery in Jaffa and Israel's intention to raze it.⁷⁸

Syria

- The Primate of the Orthodox Church of Antioch, HB Patriarch John X of Antioch and All the East, convened with his Holiness Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church, and his Holiness Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church, to discuss the difficult situation in Lebanon and Syria.⁷⁹
- The Evangelical Church in the Netherlands joined with the Middle East Council of Churches in launching a restoration fund for Syrian houses of worship and their related infrastructure.⁸⁰
- His Holiness Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church during June celebrated the Holy Qurobo on the occasion of the Feast of the Pentecost, at St. George Patriarchal Cathedral in Bab Touma – Damascus, celebrated the Holy Qurobo at the altar of the Sayfo Martyrs in Mor Aphrem Monastery in Maarat Saydnaya, and participated in the funeral service of the Late Syriac Catholic Archbishop of Homs, Hama and Nabak Mor Theophilos Philip Barakat, at the Lady of Deliverance Church in Zeydal – Homs.⁸¹



The three patriarchs convening at the Patriarchal Headquarters in Bab Tuma, Damascus, June 18, 2020 Photo Credit: Al Markazia.

⁷⁸ Alwatan Voice, June 19, 2020, <https://www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/news/2020/06/19/1345888.html>

⁷⁹ Al Markazia, June 18, 2020, <https://www.almarkazia.com/ar/news/show/227714/>

⁸⁰ Persecution, June 4, 2020, <https://www.persecution.org/2020/06/04/church-restoration-fund-launched-syria/>

⁸¹ syriacpatriarchate.org



Cyprus

- The attorney general's office cleared two bishops and three priests who held services during lockdown of any type of prosecution.⁸²
- The Church of Cyprus, in a view shared by the Greek Orthodox Church, claimed that yoga is not compatible with Christianity as it is a practice associated with Hinduism, after it was widely discussed in media during COVID-19 as a means of stress-relief and improving health.⁸³



Morphou Bishop Neophytos held a church service in Peristerona on April 12 while Trimithounta Bishop Varnavas issued a circular to priests in his area to hold services normally, June 4, 2020, photo credit: Cyprus Mail

⁸² Cyprus Mail, June 4, 2020, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/06/04/authorities-wont-prosecute-clergy-over-lockdown-services-report/>

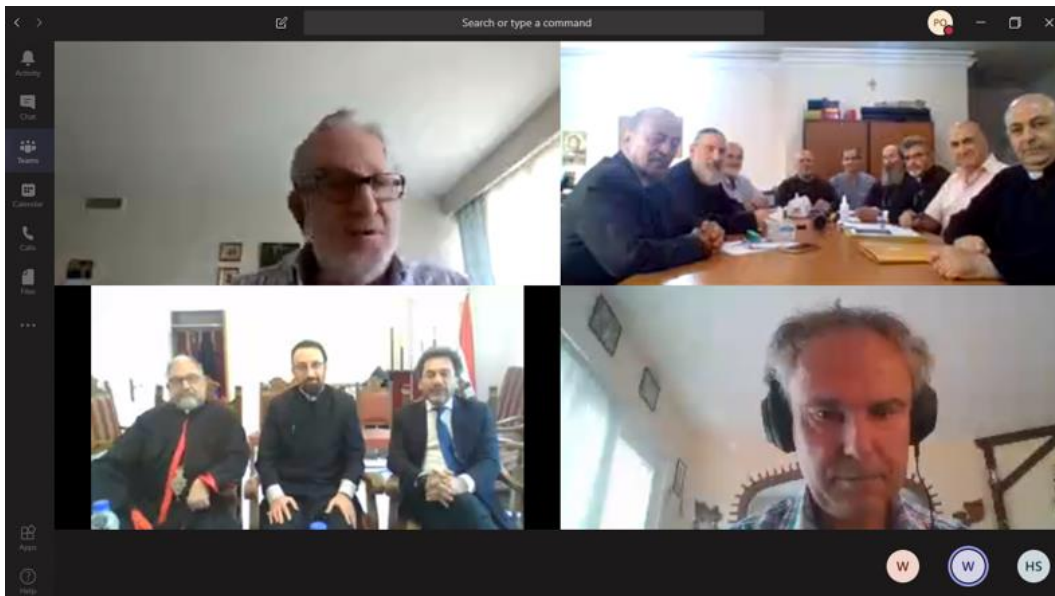
⁸³ Cyprus Mail, June 14, 2020, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/06/14/yoga-and-christianity-incompatible-church-says/>



6. MECC HEADQUARTERS ACTIVITIES

With the support of the Evangelical Church in the Netherlands and the efforts of the Middle East Council of Churches

The "Restoration Fund for rehabilitation of faith-based social services & religious infrastructure damaged during the crisis in Syria" has been launched! (June 1, 2020)



Online meeting gathering the restoration fund's steering committee, the representatives of the participating churches, and representatives of Kerk in Actie (KiA), June 1, 2020, photo credit: MECC website.

Despite the global suffering and the imminent danger caused by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the virus did not hinder the work of the Steering Committee of the "Restoration Fund for rehabilitation of faith-based social services & religious infrastructure damaged during the crisis in Syria". In fact, the committee held an online meeting that gathered the representatives of the participating churches,



representatives of Kerk in Actie (KiA) – Netherlands, which is the donor of the program, and senior officials from the General Secretariat of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC).

The official launching of the program was postponed due to the exceptional circumstances resulting from the coronavirus pandemic and the quarantine. However, these though conditions did not preclude the practical and technical launch of the program that took place during this online meeting.

The goal of the program is to contribute towards the holistic recovery of local communities by restoring and rehabilitating their places of worship as well as faith-based education, health and community facilities damaged by the conflict, and to guarantee the return of affected communities to their areas of residence, work and schools.

On behalf of Dr Souraya Bechealany, the secretary general of the Middle East Council of Churches, Samer Laham, the regional director of the Diakonia department, gave a speech in which he highlighted that: “whenever two or three are gathered, Jesus is there among them”. He announced the launch of the program by the grace of our Risen Lord adding that “its main objective is to reflect that we are working together towards a common ecumenical witness based on Jesus Christ. The program also aims at enabling churches to continue offering their social, educational and spiritual services to all affected groups in different environments, while ensuring justice and equality regardless of social, cultural or religious backgrounds”.

Laham continued his speech by saying that he hopes this pioneering project will encourage local and international partner churches to collaborate and cooperate in order to achieve the desired objectives “which mainly are the return of the displaced and refugees to their towns and villages, and the consolidation of Christian presence that has been expanding since the birth of Christianity in this region of the world”. At the end, he thanked the sponsoring church, which is one of the council’s main partners, for constantly supporting all its programs, and every person who donated to express their solidarity.

In addition, Wilbert van Saane, the representative of “Kerk in Actie”, donor of the program, gave his speech in which he stated the following: “I would like to express our unwavering commitment to the program for restoring faith-based social services and religious infrastructure, that is funded by the Restoration Fund. Our country has been very much impacted by the coronavirus. Yet, as Evangelical Church in the Netherlands, we continue to feel a special call to assist in the restoration of Syria’ communities at this time”.

He added, “as living stones we continue to be built into the spiritual temple, even when we are not physically in the same location”.



Moreover, Saane expressed that his Church is pleased to work on restoring the rich and compassionate religious and social ministries of the Syrian churches in different parts of the country. He also stressed that this project supports many local communities, especially those that cannot afford to bear the entire costs of the restoration of their infrastructure. At the end, he stated that this program is a “beautiful, ecumenical initiative gathering all ecumenical churches in Syria and fostered by the Middle East Council of Churches”.

KAIROS Online Meeting (June 5, 2020)



KAIROS meeting held online. June 5, 2020, Photo Credit: MECC Website.

Following the strategic orientation aiming at keeping an ongoing interreligious dialogue about Christian-Muslim relations and relations with other religions such as with Jews, the Theological & Ecumenical Department held the 5th consultation seminar of the process on Tuesday June 2, 2020 in order to continue the preparation of the “Kairos Middle East: Towards Churches Global Compact” white paper. The seminar, which focused on Christian-Muslim relations in particular, was held via an online platform. Before the meeting, experts in the field from the Middle East as well as experts from KAICIID were contacted and more than 20 responses were collected and consolidated to determine the axes of the discussion



in this consultation seminar. It is worth noting that the working group is also planning for a future consultation seminar that will focus on Christian-Jewish relations in order to support the Palestinian cause and all efforts for just peace in the Middle East.

In parallel, the Drafting Committee of the white paper is pursuing its mission through sub-groups that are working on elaborating and developing the different axes in depth.

Now that quarantine is over, life is back to normal at the MECC HO in Beirut (June 23, 2020)



MECC team back to their offices. June 2020, Photo Credit: MECC Website.



As we believe that life is stronger and since our hope in our Lord Jesus Christ never dies, the heart of the Middle East Council of Churches' Head Office in Beirut is beating again after almost 3 months of quarantine during which MECC team worked from home due to the precautionary measures imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

After the Lebanese government decided to ease the quarantine measures, the team members came back to the office with a revived dynamism and a strong momentum, while adhering to the necessary precautions including social distancing and the use of facemasks...

During this difficult period, the council's team members have proved that distance can only keep them physically apart, since communication through prayer and work, even remotely or virtually, can be truly fruitful and productive thanks to their joint efforts and united hearts. Now, we pursue our ecumenical mission while striving to protect human dignity, guided by our belief that our hopes are in God only.

REO's Online Meetings (June 24 2020)



Online Meetings Gathering the Communication Directors of REOs Continue, June 24, 2020, photo credit: MECC website.



Online meetings were held between the the communication directors of regional ecumenical organizations (REOs) at the invitation of the Communication Department of the World Council of Churches (WCC), noting that the Communication and Public Relations Department of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) took part in those meetings.

In the last virtual meeting, the participants discussed the situation imposed by the Coronavirus pandemic and its repercussions on each continent they represent. In addition to that, they addressed common issues and concerns such as hate speech and misleading information. They also examined work plans that they already started to implement together as well as future projects they are planning.

For her part, the director of the MECC Communication and Public Relations Department discussed new means of cooperation with the participants. She highlighted the importance of uniting efforts in order to promote peacebuilding, fight the discourse of violence, and counter the incitement to war in the Middle East region.

To conclude, the participants agreed to keep on holding monthly meetings to follow up on their joint plans and coordinate new ways of cooperation.

Despite its widespread outbreak around the world, the Coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19) did not hinder the work of the MECC Theological and Ecumenical department (TED) who was determined to continue the “Kairos Middle East Towards Churches Global Compact” process online.

In fact, the fifth consultation seminar was expected to be held between the 12th and 14th of March 2020 in Egypt; therefore, the organizing committee decided to turn the event into an online seminar instead of cancelling it. After the experts filled a survey prepared by the committee, the meeting was set to be held after the 30th of April 2020. In addition, the drafting committee in charge of writing the final white paper was formed.

As for the international partners’ meeting that was expected to take place in Berlin, it was postponed to a later date after an online meeting with the secretary of the German Bishops' Conference. During the meeting, the partners were supposed to give their feedback on the final text.

It is worth noting that the TED department previously organized 4 consultation seminars in Bethania, focusing on the Christian presence and role in the Middle East on both theological and geopolitical levels.



7. MECC Humanitarian activities June 2020

Lebanon

- Started distribution of food and non-food items, in cooperation with the Greek Orthodox Church and municipalities of each area, through a voucher system to the most vulnerable – living below poverty line – in the Akkar area namely in the villages of Rahbe, Minyara and Ayn Yaacoub.
- Continued distribution of medication particularly to elderly with chronic illnesses and continued partial cure to cancer patients through purchasing of medication and cycle treatments.
- Completed 2 sessions of Health Awareness on COVID-19 – prevention methods, symptoms, and where to go/hotline contact of MoPH for 25 women.
- Completed 11 sessions in Psychosocial support for 24 women who struggle with mental health issues of all types and severity due to loneliness.
- Completed 6 sessions in psychosocial support for 12 children to develop capacities and resources that can help them deal with the emotional, social, and practical challenges that they may and are facing in their daily lives.
- Completed 11 sessions on GBV awareness for 174 women.
- Completed 11 sessions in soft skills for 24 refugee women to prepare them to join the job market.
- Completed a further 4 sessions in a development program for 5 women by training them on how to fashion handmade eco-friendly bags.
- Completed 2 full trainings in Handcrafts of 30 sessions for 31 women aged 25 - 60 years in Sad Bauchrieh – Mount Lebanon at the Syriac Orthodox Bishopric.
- Completed one training of 34 sessions of embroidery in Nabaa area Mount Lebanon for 18 women (Iraqi, Syrian, Lebanese).



Distribution of vouchers for NFI items (L) and the product of an embroidery class (R), June 2020, Photo Credit: Diakonia.



PSS for kids (L) and GBV session for women (R), June 2020, photo credit: Diakonia.



Soft skills session (L) and health awareness session (R), June 2020, Photo Credit: Diakonia.



Syria

- Completed the distribution of children clothing kits, school kits and hygiene kits for 1335 students and orphans in Damascus and Damascus rural.
- Conducted training related to micro-gardening seed for 165 households in Daraa governorate.
- Continued of providing veterinary services to hundreds of cattle owner in Daraa governorate.
- Conducted orientation meeting with potential beneficiaries under grant to restore broken business of 25 skilled workers.
- Conducted training for staff who will be responsible of distributing hygiene kits under COVID-19 project in Daraa and Izraa.
- Launched tender process to select contractors to rehabilitate 5 schools in Homs and Damascus rural.
- Launched tender to select suppliers to distribute food baskets and hygiene kits in Jaramana.
- Launched tender process to select supplier to distribute hygiene kits in Daraa governorate.
- Registered 140 families in Aleppo to benefit from food vouchers project.



Veterinary services to hundreds of cattle owner in Daraa, June 2020, Photo Credit: Diakonia Syria



Training related to micro-gardening seed for 165 household in Daraa, June 2020, photo credit: Diakonia

8. CONCLUSION

People's livelihoods are at stake as resources are diminishing. The region is still limping from the effects of corona and corrupt rulers remain in positions of absolute power. In other words: The Middle East is in a worse place than it was. The MECC in such circumstances can only raise the voice, so that our readers acknowledge the gravity of the situation and begin to lobby for change. Truly we are nearing a societal breaking point that will either lead to constructive change or to utter chaos.