



God of life,
lead us to
justice and peace

World Council of Churches
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Statement affirming the Christian presence and witness in the Middle East

*Jesus said, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it gives your Father great happiness to give you the kingdom."
(Luke 12:32)*

"Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid."

1. Christians still keep hope

The profound political changes that have swept the Middle East and North Africa, since early 2011 following popular uprisings, have carried with them hopes for political systems based on human rights and the rule of law. The seeds of an irreversible transformation have been sown. However, in several countries the efforts towards political transformation have been rejected, which has undermined the demands for peaceful reform. Quite rapidly, large areas of the Middle East and North Africa have succumbed to violent sectarian, ethnic, and tribal animosities, and the reform movement has been distracted by political radicalism and religious intolerance. This has led to a widespread humanitarian catastrophe. In this critical situation, the worldwide Christian community is enjoined to manifest its solidarity with all peoples in the Middle East who are struggling for just and peaceful societies, and, at the same time, affirms that the continued presence of Christians in this region is indispensable for plural and diverse communities, and commits itself to accompany all in the building of democratic civil societies.

1.1. The circumstances throughout the Middle East present the churches with a new *kairos* moment as in the "*Kairos Palestine: A Moment of Truth*" document of 2009, when Palestinian Christians joined in a common reading of the situation, and challenged the churches to prophetic action.

1.1.1. In May 2013, in Lebanon, the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) convened an ecumenical gathering of Christian leaders and representatives from churches and organizations in the region and from 34 other countries, to explore ways to strengthen the Christian presence and witness. They observed that: "*This is a time of crisis with special intensity here in the Middle East, but affects all of humankind. The elements of this crisis include an intensification of religious tribalism, increasing fundamentalism in many of the world's religions, dispersion of the influence of radicalized Islamist groups, widespread violence and insecurity, a deficit in democratic legitimacy and credibility, poverty and lack of opportunity, especially for women and youth, Christian emigration from the region, and a generalized sense of abandonment following decades of unhelpful intervention. Christians, Muslims and Jews all experience the destructive effects of these trends.*"

2. Vibrant Christian churches

Christians are rooted in the soil of the Middle East. From the manger of Bethlehem of Judea, the refuge of Egypt, the waters of the Jordan River and Sea of Galilee, and the road to the Cross in Jerusalem itself, Christians are as rooted in the soil of the Middle East as are olive trees in the Garden of Gethsemane and cedars in Lebanon. It was on the road to Damascus that Paul was converted (Acts 9) and in Antioch that the disciples first were called Christians (Acts 11:26).

2.1 Despite the ups and downs of harsh and testing historical, as well as present circumstances, Christians have continued and will continue to live together with those with whom this soil is shared. The Christians living in this region are an essential part of their lands, contributing to the rich traditions, plural societies and cultural diversity. In the 19th century, Christians in the region struggled to change their status to one where they would be equal with all other citizens in their societies. Christians today are aware that the guarantee of their free, engaged and meaningful existence in these societies is not by protection, nor a bequest given by political powers, but is acquired by forthright participation as citizens, and by persistent patience in encouraging mentalities and structures that enhance the free participation of all. Today, they do not see themselves as minorities. Rather, they view themselves as equal citizens contributing to the well-being of their nations. Their mission and witness in society is evident in multiple spheres of public life such as in culture, politics, education, health services, women and youth development, child protection, social services, relief and development. Numerical proportion historically has not limited the contribution and role of Christians in the Middle East.

2.2. Christians in the region have contributed to the idea that plurality is a gift of God, and that respect for diversity in plural societies is an affirmation that all peoples are created equal in the eyes of God.

2.2.1. In addition to the diversity of religions, diversity also exists within the rich and varied traditions among Christian churches in the Middle East. This has prompted forms of ecumenism that are particular to the region. Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant and Anglican churches, have together participate in the MECC as an instrument for joint witness and *diakonia*. But ecumenism in the region goes beyond this institutional context to reach the everyday lives of Christians.

2.3. Christian spirituality and witness are revealed by the vibrant monastic communities and parishes, theological faculties, hospitals, schools and humanitarian services. These are essential parts of the creative and continuous witness of the Christians and the churches, offering spiritual resources to all people in the region.

3. Christians in the regional turmoil are called to work for justice and peace

Yet, despite the centuries-long reality of plural communities in the Middle East, some have exploited the current turmoil to advance political radicalism and religious intolerance. Hundreds of thousands of people in the region have been killed, maimed, imprisoned and displaced. The numbers of suffering, internally displaced people, and refugees into neighbouring countries of the Middle East and beyond have created a crushing humanitarian catastrophe.

3.1 In Syria, violence and turmoil have ravaged the lives of millions of people. Abductions of civilians, including clergy, and torture, massacres and extrajudicial killings have become a daily reality. Entire communities, families and individuals, have been forced to flee their homes, to find refuge in other areas of their country, in neighbouring countries and in distant places. Humanitarian relief is unable to meet the desperate needs of dislocated people. The movement of refugees from Syria to neighbouring countries has stressed those in flight and those offering hospitality. The political turmoil within Syria threatens the unity and stability of Syria and its neighbours. This massive movement of population carries serious implications for those who remain and hope for reconciled communities once peace and stability are restored.

3.2. In Egypt, political turmoil has provided a pretext to instrumentalise and politicise religion, where again, the Christian population and places of worship have been particularly targeted. The level of violence and tensions has increased considerably and reached an alarming level. It is hoped that the young generation which struggled for freedom, human dignity and equal rights to prevail in Egypt, will continue this long struggle and most importantly, will continue this struggle in an inclusive way with all those who hold these values.

3.3. In Iraq, even after the withdrawal of foreign occupying forces, people are still not enjoying human security and dignity. Acts of violence all over the country have reached alarming levels and are affecting the entire population, including the already vulnerable Christian community. Genuine democracy, equal citizenship, the rule of law, reconciliation and impartial development are still out of reach. Under such conditions, Iraq is at great risk of being emptied of its human resources. It is hoped that Iraqis will work together, healing wounds and building a better future for themselves. It is also essential that dialogue between Christians and Muslims continues in order to promote justice and peace in the country.

3.4. Christians in Iran have been living in the country for centuries, contributing to its rich culture and civilisation. They constitute an integral part of the society and, along with the rest of Iranians, are suffering from the international sanctions that have a harmful impact on them much more than on the government. Lifting the sanctions will encourage the present government to persevere with the undertaken reforms and to abide by its international obligations under the terms of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

3.5. This tension and violence around the Middle East and in North Africa is taking place in the midst of the on-going and longstanding Palestine/Israel conflict in the region, and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian and Arab territories since 1967. This remains a central issue and a major source of concern for all who are working for peace with justice and for reconciliation. It also remains the core problem that is fuelling the logic underlying many of the conflicts in the region, putting at risk international relations and peace. Resolving once and for all the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians in accordance with United Nations resolutions and international law, addressing all final status issues, including the right of return, can only help in resolving the other conflicts in the region.

3.6. In Jerusalem today Palestinians, Christians and Muslims alike, face discriminatory Israeli policies. "Jerusalem is the foundation of our vision and our entire life. She is the city to which God gave a particular importance in the history of humanity" (*Kairos* Palestine document). Jews, Christians and Muslims alike look to Jerusalem as a place God blessed with the significance of His presence. As a city of two nations revered by the faithful of three religions, it needs to be the place that models for the world the possibilities of living together peacefully in mutual respect.

4. The Gospel imperative for costly ecumenical solidarity

Christians reject on principle governance that diminishes and disenfranchises the people's right to express opinion or to fully participate in the formulation of public policy. The popular uprisings and subsequent unrest across the region, however chaotic and dangerous, nonetheless reflect the urgency and capacity of people to claim their right to good governance and protection under the law. These historic events demonstrate the public's repudiation of insecurity in the region, including the manipulation of religious teachings, economic inequalities, failing political alliances, and the imbalances of power that threaten all the people of the region, and humankind. Despite the current turmoil in the region, the long commitment of the Church must remain steadfast to sow seeds of peace and justice and build on the progress that is being made.

4.1. The WCC has consistently expressed its deep concern for all peoples in this region where the history of our faith was born and grew. More particularly, the Christian presence and witness in the land of the Bible has been of vital significance for the ecumenical family, from its inception up until the

present day. The central committee, meeting in Geneva in February 2011, grounded theologically the importance of this presence by stating that “*the WCC has viewed the Middle East as a region of special interest, being the birthplace of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam... Our living faith has its roots in this land, and is nourished and nurtured by the unbroken witness of the local churches who have their own roots from the apostolic times. Without this Christian presence, the conviviality among peoples from different faiths, cultures, civilisations, which is a sign of God’s love for all humanity, will be endangered. In addition, its extinction will be a sign of failure of the ecumenical family to express the Gospel imperative for costly solidarity*”. It also expressed the Council’s principles that guide its policy concerning the Middle East region: “*God’s justice and love for all of creation, the fundamental rights of all people, respect for human dignity, solidarity with the needy, and dialogue with people of other faiths*”. It finally noted that “*political developments in the region point to signs of hope for democratic changes, respect for human rights and the rule of law in several countries*”. In this context the WCC reaffirms the principle expressed by the central committee in 2011 that “*peace and reconciliation must be conditioned by justice*”. The future of the churches and the Christians in these countries is and must be a concern for the entire ecumenical family.

The 10th Assembly of the WCC, meeting in Busan, Republic of Korea from 30 October to 8 November 2013, therefore:

- A. ***Reaffirms*** that Christians in the Middle East hold in a unique, tangible way the legacy of the apostolic era, preserving in the footsteps of our Lord the living Church. Support of these Christian communities, spiritually and materially, preserves the continuity of the Christian presence for the benefit of all Christians and all people from the region and worldwide;
- B. ***Regards*** current events in various countries in the Middle East as an irreversible process leading to changes in systems of governance, and hopes for a future of justice, peace and stability, cultural diversity and plural communities;
- C. ***Prays*** that Christians, especially in the region, maintain their hope even in these extremely critical situations and that these events will be an opportunity for positive change in these societies and for participatory democracy;
- D. ***Encourages*** all peoples in the region, including Christians, to initiate actions questioning the abuse of authority and rejecting corruption, as they continue to support one another in the common effort to build democratic civil societies, based on the rule of law, social justice, and respect for human rights, including religious freedom and freedom of conscience;
- E. ***Supports*** Christians in the region in their commitment to engage in constructive dialogue with other religious and ethnic communities so that their countries’ manifold heritage is protected and secured;
- F. ***Recommends*** that the WCC reinforces programmes that enhance regional and international advocacy in partnership with Christians in the Middle East and North Africa;
- G. ***Calls*** upon the WCC member churches to express costly solidarity with Christians and churches in the region as well as with all peoples who are struggling for justice and peace, through:
 - a. ***Supporting*** efforts to reinvigorate the MECC, in order to enable it to continue being the voice of Middle East Christians to the world, and the trusted source of basic objective information;
 - b. ***Accompanying*** Christians in the Middle East as they elaborate a common vision for the region;
 - c. ***Facilitating*** responsible pilgrimage to the region.;
 - d. ***Organising*** solidarity visits in consultation with churches in the region, remaining in active fellowship with them;
 - e. ***Disseminating*** educational materials that accurately reflect the geography and history of the Middle East and the realities of sister churches located there;

- f. **Developing** exchange programmes to facilitate the sharing of experiences, information on interfaith relations and dialogue among the churches and religions; and
 - g. **Supporting** local churches in empowering women, young people and children to use and develop their capacities and providing opportunities for their meaningful participation in the churches and society;
- H. **Urges** church-related agencies and all ecumenical partners to strengthen their efforts to address the humanitarian needs in Syria and in all neighbouring countries, focusing humanitarian efforts upon (1) assisting Syrians to remain in their home communities, (2) easing the burden of internally displaced persons and the communities hosting them, (3) easing the burden of host families and communities in neighbouring countries (4) assisting refugees with the goal and intention to facilitate their resettlement into their own communities and homes in Syria, and **insists** that all governments allow for full humanitarian access, seeking peaceful ways to exert pressure to stop actions of violence;
- I. **Urges** the United Nations, and the international community, especially countries that are in positions of political power, to create policies that promote and reach comprehensive peace with justice for all peoples of the region, and to expand every effort to support cessation of violence and military activities;
- J. **Reiterates** its call to the United Nations to secure and protect the integrity of the holy sites of all religions in Jerusalem and make them accessible to all as well as to end the occupation of East Jerusalem by Israel;
- K. **Demands** the immediate release of the two Archbishops from Aleppo, His Eminence Boulos (Yazigi) Greek Orthodox Metropolitan of Aleppo and Alexandretta and His Eminence Mor Youhanna Gregorios (Ibrahim) Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan of Aleppo in Syria, kidnapped on 22 April 2013 as they were on a humanitarian mission to negotiate the release of two kidnapped priests from Aleppo, as well as Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, kidnapped on 29 July 2013, and all captives and those unjustly imprisoned.

Great God,

Hear us as we cry out to you for peace and justice for the peoples and the land itself.

Grant us homelands where water, land and resources are respected and shared by all.

Help us share your love with our neighbours and plant the seeds of tolerance in our communities.

Comfort us so that our souls are healed from the wounds of wars and conflicts.

Give us your light that we may walk out of the shadows of death and impunity.

May your justice truly course through our lands like an unstoppable torrent.

Teach us to trust in hope that one day soon all may dwell beneath their vines and fig trees in peace and happiness.

Opening Prayer, WCC 10th Assembly, 30 October 2013

APPROVED