

Ecumenical Response to the Present Middle East Crisis

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Your Beatitudes,
Your Eminences,
People of God,
Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Jesus Christ says to us today, *“Get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. I will rescue you.”* (Acts 26.16–17)

Today, as I come before you to discuss the crisis facing the Middle East and especially the crisis facing Arab and Middle Eastern Christians, these words of the risen Christ to the Saul resonate for us and for the communities we represent. *“Get up and stand on your feet!”* *“I will rescue you!”* There is work to be done in my name.

I have been asked to speak on the ecumenical response to our present crisis. Therefore, my message today is both internal and external, speaking to Christians in the Middle East as well as to the global Body of Christ. An ecumenical response—a response by the entire household of Christian faith—is necessarily global. But the response must first begin with us. As Jesus said, *“If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand”* (Mark 3.25). In the presence of these pressing challenges, it is time to get our Arab Christian house in order.

Speaking to Arab Christian Leaders

1. We Need Greater Unity

My brothers and sisters, the challenges we face today demand that we practice with one another the disciplines of unity. I am not speaking of complete confessional unanimity, but unity of voice as we together confront the linked challenges of 1) religiously-sanctioned extremism, 2) new forms of religious persecution, and 3) weak national governments unable or unwilling to protect all their citizens. In this time, the unity of our witness is more vital than ever.

We are taking important steps toward this unity. It is heartening to see important steps being taken by international church bodies—including the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation—to address our situation. Some good statements have been issued, and important efforts like the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) have been implemented. As the global body of Christ, we are in greater conversation with one another than ever before. This helps us, especially in the areas of humanitarian response. Regionally, we have all

benefited from ecumenical organizations like the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) and the Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches (FMEEC).

But we must admit that ecumenical cooperation in the Middle East has never been easy. Since 1948 until today, any discussion about Christian life in the Middle East has been complicated by various tensions. This is especially the case for western Christians. But we also have been fragmented among ourselves. There is a long history of competition among Churches for members, with some evangelicals taking people away from historic churches and historic churches accusing evangelicals of proselytism. We have worked to acknowledge the offense of such practices and overcome that difficult history.

Unfortunately, it can feel that we are more interested in playing games with one another or competing with one another for international funding than we are in building unity. In those competitions, we are tempted to assert our identities in ways that denigrate or marginalize other Christians. Some of us can appear to be more interested in running businesses and collecting outside funding than in benefitting the whole of the Christian community. In short, we are tempted to refuse God's call to be our brother's keeper, to be a neighbor to the one who is wounded. These ways of being with one another must come to an end! There is no other possibility at this stage than unity. Unity for the diverse Body of Christ in the Middle East.

2. Unity in Baptism

Without a unified voice, our witness is weakened and our people are endangered. We must remember that unity does not require unanimity. Even in this room there are different views of the current situation and what should be done about it. Such disagreements can be honest and healthy. But that does not change the outcome we are seeing. Da'esh¹ and Nusra² do not differentiate whether we are Orthodox or Catholic or Presbyterian. To speak against these movements, we must be unified.

I must stress, however, that it is not Da'esh that unites us, but Christ alone. Our unity is grounded in Holy Baptism, where we have been united with Christ in both death and resurrection. Even though the present crisis demands unity, it is not the source of our unity. While we do not seek martyrdom, our shared baptism gives us the courage to sacrifice. In baptism, we claim our vocation to live and work as integral parts of the fabric of our societies, sharing their sorrows, dreams and aspirations. As Arab Christians, we reject ghetto mentalities and minority complexes. Joined with Christ in baptism, we build our societies, bring hope to hopeless situations, and work to develop civil societies that respect human rights, freedom of religion, gender justice, and freedom of expression. This process of reform continues to be on the heart of every Arab and Middle Eastern Christian until today. Our hope will not end until we see the Middle East transformed into the values we cherish. Our goal is not merely to survive, but to thrive.

Part of that thriving is to better comprehend the challenges we face with our neighbors who are Muslim. Facing this challenge means not succumbing to simplistic anti-Islamic thought; it means, rather, adopting a compassionate and empathetic approach with our Muslim neighbors who are struggling to see what is happening in certain sectors of their community and how they might work against extremist impulses. Because anti-Islamic attitudes are common in the West, part of our

¹ The pejorative Arabic word referring to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (IS or ISIL).

² Referring to the al-Nusra Front, the Qaeda-linked extremist group operating in Syria, rebelling against Bashar al-Assad, but also in conflict with rebel militias like the Free Syrian Army that are primarily motivated by nationalist rather than sectarian concerns.

witness as Arab and Middle Eastern Christians is to be a voice for Islam. We are called to defend the religion itself against claims that groups like Da'esh and Nusra and the Ikhwan³ represent the suspected "true face" of Islam. It may sound strange that we would be the voice of Islam, but we cannot be shy about this. We need to not bear false witness against any of our neighbors so that other do not take false revenge.

Each of us dearly loves our own church. This can be healthy as long as it does not negatively impact others. While everyone wants to preserve their church or denominational presence, we sometimes forget other churches that are filled with brothers and sisters in Christ. Our institutional allegiances and loyalties can sometimes lead us to pursue benefits for our own communities while failing to see the whole.

This temptation has long been present in churches and related agencies that raise money for themselves and give only to themselves. In the present crises of the Middle East, we have seen similar things. I could not help but notice, for instance, that when the Oriental Patriarchs recently issued a very good and meaningful statement, they failed to invite the Evangelical family to join them. Soon after, the Higher Council of Evangelicals in Lebanon and Syria issued their own very good and important urgent appeal. This is a situation in which the Oriental and Evangelical churches are speaking, but are speaking separately. Again, while I was happy that the Vatican invited Evangelicals to attend the special Synod meeting in 2010, the resulting 44 Propositions made it appear that the Vatican cared for Catholic presence alone. Many other good efforts could be named that have the same problem.

All of this creates confusion for international partners. They do not want to divide the Body of Christ or choose winners and losers among us. Who will they hear, one or the other? Is it our desire that one group receive empathy and (potentially) funding, but the other should not? Our common voice helps all of us in the end! I raise these points not to make accusations, but to explore how we can work to strengthen each other. As fellow members of the Body of Christ, sharing in one another's suffering and rejoicing, how can your presence be an extension of my presence, and vice versa?

3. Strengthening the MECC

Our unity must not be made up of good feelings alone. We need a common street address if we are going to speak effectively. Our ecumenical address is the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC). For too long, we treated the MECC as an optional institution. International partners were right to withhold their funding until we recommitted to it. Now, with the MECC nearly absent in these years of crisis, we see what a strong benefit it can be. This institution must be revived in order to offer a shared, ecumenical witness for Christians throughout the Middle East. We are happy that FMEEC is strong. But we cannot give up the MECC. Our strength as FMEEC is in the MECC; the strength of MECC is in the four families of churches. This is the reason the four presidents of the MECC are calling for a meeting of all the heads of churches in the Middle East during the week of prayer for Christian unity in January. Our aim is to develop a common strategy and common Christian voice to address the present crisis.

The MECC must be fully revived for at least three priorities:

a. Muslim-Christian engagement

One vital role for the MECC is organizing and encouraging Muslim-Christian engagement. Arab Christians today have no choice but to be in conversation with our neighbors. This engagement

³ The Ikhwan Muslimiyya, or Muslim Brotherhood.

is not just for religious understanding, but to shape our shared political future. We must engage with our Muslim neighbors on the question of the proper relation between religion and state. We must advocate for equal citizenship with equal rights and equal responsibilities that can be secured by stable and secure states with reliable constitutions. We must advocate for religious freedom, freedom of conviction, and freedom of conscience. While it is helpful for our churches and groups to engage Muslims separately, we also need to do so together, as a group. In this way, we make it clear that each church and organization is seeking the good for all communities, not just cutting deals for themselves alone. The MECC is a vital institution for presenting a unified Christian voice.

b. *A Common Christian Prophetic Diakonia*

The MECC can be a convening forum for coordinating diaconal work by and for Christians throughout the Middle East. I again stress that, in this crisis, many of our churches and related agencies have done fine work. My sense, however, is that we could much stronger if we were able to have a unified voice and a coordinated approach. The MECC and, especially, ICNDR can be helpful tools. Our diakonal work is prophetic because it is intended to help the whole society, not simply our Christian communities alone. We help all persons in need regardless of how they might identify. Our witness is found in our schools, our hospitals and clinics, in our commitment to psychosocial wellbeing, in whatever our societies need to be served.

c. *Indigenous Arab Christian political theology*

I would to suggest one priority for the MECC as a coordinating body. Recent events have shown us that we need to develop an indigenous Arab Christian political theology. This is a challenge for every church in the Middle East, in every family. We need to creatively engage the changing political landscape of the Middle East with contributions drawn from our experiences and our values. Since the end of the Ottoman Empire, many of our communities have relied on secular autocrats who limited the religious impulses of other communities. We have seen what has happened to us when those suppressed religious impulses erupt. At the same time, “democracy” is a damaged concept in the Middle East. We do not do enough to fully promote the voices of evangelicals and others working to address the full complexities of the region. We need to revive our constructive political engagement. “Get up,” Jesus says, “and stand on your feet!”

Christians in the Middle East are being threatened and challenged like never before. Partly, this is because we are seeing innovative forms of Islam manipulated for certain political and economic purposes. But our challenges also stem from our lack of unity. As the writer of Ecclesiastes said, “though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken” (4.12). The four families of Churches in the Middle East must stand together and must be a strong voice for Christians.

Speaking to Christian Sisters and Brothers throughout the World

1. Unity and Accompaniment

Many churches in the Middle East are privileged to have good relationships with sisters and brothers in Europe and North America. These churches are located in areas of the world where Christianity has informed the dominant culture and where economies are historically more stable. This has strengthened our partner churches and allowed them to share resources with their sisters and brothers throughout the world. In Europe, these churches are even able to access governmental funding so it can be distributed.

It can be easy to forget, however, that our relationship is not grounded primarily in sharing money. Just as it is with the many churches of the Middle East, our relationship is grounded in Baptism, in the unity provided by Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit. As fellow baptized members of the Christian community, we accompany one another as equals. This does not change if one is rich and the other is poor. Therefore, we cannot allow our different financial situations to determine our relationship. Moreover, Arab Christians refuse to allow our relative poverty to oppress us or limit our voice. We must claim our dignity. In this time of crisis, we must be willing to stand as equals with our partners, not being afraid that the funding tap will be closed if we voice an opinion they do not want to hear. As Samuel Kabira, one of my predecessors as President of the Lutheran World Federation, was fond of saying, "There is no church so small, so poor, so young in age that it would not have something to give to other churches; and there is no church so old, so rich, and so old in tradition and history that it would not depend on these gifts from others."

Instead of relationships of dependence, we ask that you accompany us as equals. Take seriously our own assessment of our situation, an assessment that will likely differ from those provided by your governments or by NATO. In our relationship of accompaniment, we ask that you strengthen us financially and theologically so we can preserve our presence in Christianity's historic home. In order to achieve this goal of sustainability, we need partners around the globe to support not just special projects and NGOs, but the churches themselves. While institutional churches may seem unfashionable, it is the churches that provide anchors for Arab and Middle Eastern Christian communal presence and witness. While we appreciate humanitarian assistance, we need institutional strengthening as well.

2. Take Care in Your Speech

Arab and Middle Eastern Christians often express disappointment with churches and church-related organizations in the West. We are tired of their speeches. We want action. We face continual challenges in working together for supporting Christians in the Middle East. Middle East churches bear responsibility for building relationships with the global Body of Christ. But there is also responsibility in the West to not abandon Christians in the Middle East.

Western churches do not always understand us when we speak with them. In this time of crisis, many western Christians are taking the opportunity to claim Arab Christians as their children, treating us as damsels in distress who need to be rescued from our Muslim neighbors. We must stand strong, rejecting this paternalistic, neocolonial approach.

There are many reasons one can name in order to explain or comprehend the eruption of different forms of extremism in the Middle East. At its basis, extremism (especially religiously-sanctioned extremism) is a symptom of frustrated political possibilities. When there is no horizon for political possibility, extremism grows. This despair has grown for several reasons. First among them is the inability of the Arab world to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While this conflict may indeed be out of the hands of leaders in the region, they also have not been able to demonstrate confidence that it will be resolved. Secondly, the collapse of pan-Arabism has created a vacuum leading to the political fragmentation of the political order. All of this was exacerbated by military attacks from regional and global powers which weakened governments still further and helped sustain anti-western sentiment. Finally, the events known as the Arab Spring have provided even greater space for non-state actors. Together, all of this history has led to the present point in which religiously-sanctioned extremism is dominating the common life of the Middle East.

Your Arab Christian sisters and brothers ask that you be especially careful in your speeches and statements about our situation. We have heard many of you expressing various forms of sorrow or lament. While such statements are not necessarily harmful to us, they do nothing to help our situation. We can be offended when you speak only to help yourselves feel better while ignoring steps that can be taken. In many ways, statements expressing lament neglect the fact that decades of your governments' Middle East policies and your military actions have helped create the current chaos. Western churches considering statements of lament or empty appeals to peace should consider statements of confession for themselves on behalf of their societies.

3. Defending Arab Christians

We are especially concerned with statements suggesting that our problems stem from Islam and Muslims rather than religiously-sanctioned extremism of all sorts—Jewish, Muslim, and Christian. Such statements harm us because they separate us from our neighbors, neighbors with whom we are facing the same struggles. We have noticed that your newspapers are filled with opinions that use Arab Christians as tools in some sort of civilizational struggle. We have seen many recent articles using us to perpetuate western competition with the Islamic world. This is not just Islamophobia, but virulent hatred of Islam. We have also seen specific arguments using the plight of Arab Christians as a tool to justify support for the State of Israel. The argument we see growing in western media is that al-Nusra and Da'esh represent the "true" face of Islam and that all "civilized" groups are in battle with "savage" or "barbaric" Muslims. Because of centuries of western intervention based on "protecting" Christians, such arguments harm our ability to survive in the Middle East. Instead, these arguments strengthen extremists on all sides, in your countries as well as in the Middle East.

This is a problem especially for life in Israel and Palestine. The president of the World Jewish Congress, Ronald Lauder, recently published an opinion piece in the New York Times titled "Who will Stand Up for the Christians." He claimed that the world was silent while Muslims were slaughtering Christians. Western Christians must understand that Lauder's commitment to speak about Arab Christian suffering was directed more at you than to us. His argument is that the "bond between Jews and Christians makes complete sense" and that "Christians can openly practice their religion in Israel, unlike in much of the Middle East." For years, the Israeli government has been working to craft a narrative that it is best suited to protect Christians. Recently, the Israeli Knesset has passed laws granting Christians special privileges over Muslims in Israeli legal structures. One element of this effort was to assert that Christians, unlike Muslims, are not Arabs. We are being severed from our cultural and ethnic heritage. The occupier of our land is now seeking to occupy our minds. Any concept that Arab Christians are somehow set apart from broader Arab society threatens to undermine our participation in those societies. While we are concerned about extremism, we are equally concerned about such paternalism. Who will stand up for the Christians? Grounded in the unity we have in Baptism and in the bond we have as Arabs Christians, we will stand up for ourselves!

As I speak, the United States is building a global coalition to fight against Da'esh, which calls itself the Islamic State. In the course of one week, President Obama said that there was no clear strategy against Da'esh; one week later, he said that the goal was degrading and destroying it. When paired with the inability of the United States and other western countries to limit the actions of the State of Israel, such efforts reinforce the impression that NATO countries are engaged in a global war not just against religiously-sanctioned extremism but against Islam itself. Arab Christians know that the US-led efforts in Syria and Iraq has almost nothing to do with us. They are engaging in strikes for their own interests alone. It is for oil, not for the protection of vulnerable groups. All of this makes us

weaker. Here, I am concerned not just about Christians but about all groups in the Middle East. Christians *cannot* be used as an excuse to promote military strikes against Muslims!

4. Unintentional Indifference

We are seeing fundamental threats to Christian presence in more than one part of the Middle East. If they have the resources to do so, our people are leaving the region at an alarming rate. Once they leave, they rarely return. Even while we are experiencing this crisis, we are observing among other church partners—especially in the West—what one might call an unintentional indifference. The situation in the Middle East is so complex, so culturally complicated, and so politically charged that it can feel like the domain of governments alone. So it feels that, in some cases, churches have given up on trying to comprehend the region. The church voice is then reduced to empty statements of concern or lament, hoping that someone else will come up with a solution.

I have heard some Arab Christian leaders express great frustration with western governments and churches, wondering if they would be satisfied if there were no Christian presence in the Middle East. This is of course not true, but we have not seen actions to back up that sentiment. The actions we have seen hurt our communities rather than help them stay in their land. When, for instance, the Yazidi people were dismissed from their land, the government of France issued eleven passports. Arab Christians do not want to be evacuated out of our lands. What we want is for people to stay in or return to their own communities. We need to be protected not by foreign powers but by equal citizenship and equal rights guaranteed through a common constitution. Yazidis, Christians, and other minorities should be able to return to their own villages with the security provided by their own society and governments, not the violent protection of international troops.

A Strategy toward the Future

As difficult as it is, we must look beyond the present moment. Arab Christians must develop a common voice that will be able to speak to our neighbors and to our governments in the Middle East. We must also be able to speak with one voice to the global Body of Christ, especially churches in countries now being organized to launch yet another war in our region. We must seek to avoid this war at all costs.

Some have called for arming minority communities in Syria and Iraq. We cannot accept this option. Defense should be achieved through official armies, not informal militias. We have seen the chaos that can erupt when people take matters into their own hands. Extremism thrives when these conflicts are fed by greater violence.

The present crisis demands an ecumenical response from the global church. It cannot be addressed by Middle Eastern Christians alone. And western churches need to work with us to develop the ways they seek to inform their societies and influence their governments. The key to this challenge is to strengthen civil society through education. Churches in the Arab world need to be accompanied as they seek to maintain their long-standing ministries of education. Education is the focus that will build our civil society and help all of us combat every kind of extremism.

One of the challenges we must face together—churches in the Middle East along with our international partners—is that local churches are struggling with administrative and financial issues. Again, we deeply appreciate the accompaniment we have experienced with international partners. Still, many of us feel that we are too focused on our partners in the West; we want to please our

partners, but are not spending enough time challenging our society. This is a form of alienation. The assistance we need is not just about money. It is about strengthening our sense of accountability to one another—between our churches and within our churches—while strengthening accountability to our societies. At this point, the administrative and financial challenges we face make us into birds flying with a broken wing. If these challenges were removed or decreased, we could soar like eagles.

We can do this work together because, in the Middle East, we are not strangers. We have been carrying the Gospel of Jesus Christ for 2000 years. For 2000 years, we have been in what is now called the Middle East, residing in and contributing to the countries that have grown up around us. Although we are small in numbers, we refuse to have a minority complex where we seek our own protection alone. Instead, we must understand our presence as a witness. Arab and Middle Eastern Christians together—all four families here in the region—must understand that our role in society is to be instruments of peace, brokers of justice, builders of civil society, promoters of human rights (including women’s rights), defenders of freedom of speech and conscience, initiators of dialogue, ministers of reconciliation, and apostles of love. It is our task to contribute toward a Middle East of blessed diversity that promotes equal citizenship with equal rights and equal responsibilities.

In the longer term, we need to develop strategies for reducing the appeal of religiously-sanctioned extremism. Some would argue that religious extremism is the natural outworking of religious commitment. My response is that religious extremism is, in fact, a perversion of religious commitment itself. I must be clear: no religion has a monopoly on extremism. In addition to violent expressions of Islamic extremism which harm Christians, Jews and moderate Muslims alike, we are seeing a growth in Jewish extremism, especially among some settler groups. While Christian Zionism can seem less directly harmful to human flourishing, Arabs are very aware of how Christian Zionists justify and promote state violence by “blessing” wars against certain enemies as reflecting the will of God. All of these forms of extremism drive us away from relationship with one another, harming our shared capacity to draw create a sustainable future in which all human communities can flourish. All religious leaders—both in the Middle East and around the world—have a responsibility to identify and challenge the many ways religion is abused in their societies.

In the short term, churches must have the courage to challenge their political leaders and not to simply follow the governmental line. We must all be aware that events in the Middle East have caught governments by surprise. Recent wars in the Middle East have unleashed cultural forces and long-suppressed tensions many governments do not fully understand.

We have two options in the Middle East: we either die separately or live together, witnessing in unity. We opt to live together, witnessing in the unity of Christ.

As integral parts of our societies, Arab Christians can make vital contributions toward understanding and resolving the present tensions. But this can only be accomplished through the disciplines of ecumenical unity. Listen again to the words of Jesus: *“Get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. I will rescue you.”* (Acts 26.16–17)

May God bless us, rescuing us and the people we serve.