

World Council of Churches - Middle East Council of Churches
International & Ecumenical Conference
"Christians in the Middle East: Presence and Witness"
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Working Paper

We, the Christians of the Middle East, meet to be the witnesses of Christian faith. We believe that the Gospel calls us always to love God and love our neighbour and all people, as did Jesus Christ, established by God the Father as the supreme example of divine love. In Him, the whole of humanity is reconciled and united in the bond of God's plan of salvation.

As we meet, we are aware that we are deeply rooted in these lands, and we are called to be ministers of reconciliation and to help human beings discover more fully their humanity in all its cultural and spiritual dimensions.

While we meet, we are also aware that existential necessities require that we take account of the political, social, and cultural changes in our societies, which profoundly affect our presence and testimony in our countries and in the whole region.

In this meeting, we look forward to discovering new ways of understanding the realities of our existence in this region that go beyond those realities to which we have been accustomed. We need to find new ways of speaking that transcend familiar old arguments and perspectives.

1. We look into the current situation, attempting to read the signs of the times from our Christian perspective. It is essential that we observe the cultural and historical convulsions which our region is now going through. The following realities which are both promising and disturbing must be taken into consideration:

1.1 The centrality of the Palestinian cause in the region and the ongoing Israeli aggression against Palestinian territories and the Palestinian people.

Our main source of concern in the region is that the State of Israel continues to ignore international resolutions, and tries persistently to legitimize what is illegitimate, i.e. the deplorable occupation of Palestinian territories that hinders just and comprehensive peace in the region. Many countries are committed to the peace process, which aims to establish an independent, viable Palestinian State around its historical capital Jerusalem. Among the ugly manifestations of Israeli aggression are the continuing construction of the separation wall which cuts apart the future Palestinian state, and the persistence in ignoring the right of return of Palestinian refugees, as well as the policy of settlements on the territories of the future Palestinian state, in the awareness that such settlement activity hinder the two-state solution. There is also the regular enactment of laws that are connected to efforts to "Judaize" the state and the land itself. Those who are non-Jewish Israeli citizens are thus relegated to second-class citizenship. Impeding the regional peace

process fuels conflicts in the region and in the world, making the situation more complex, clothing it with religious and cultural dimensions.

1.2 The active role of youth in the recent changes in the region

1.2.1 Middle Eastern societies are being faced with turbulent convulsions which are heralding difficult changes in intellectual and social structures. One of the characteristics of our time is the mobilization of the potentialities of young people in Arab societies. This drove the younger generation to demand the toppling of tyrannical intellectual and political systems, and to work to formulate a new perception for their societies based on the respect of individual human rights, including self-dignity and creative freedom, and promoting the values of equality, justice, and solidarity. Therefore, a bright new dawn in the region has broken: people have risen up for their dignity in a variety of ways. Their uprising has resulted in a hope that has cast away the depth of darkness in many nations, bringing forth in the Arab consciousness life and vitality.

1.2.2 However, the quick pace of such transformations, the intellectual and religious background which dominated the mentality of many people in Middle Eastern countries and societies, and extraneous interests which colluded to exploit the uprising, undermined the demands for peaceful reform in several countries. Therefore most of these societies succumbed to bloody conflicts. Sectarian, ethnic, and tribal animosities divided people. What makes the situation even worse is that Islamic religious parties, which came to power thanks to the votes of people who overthrew Arab tyrannical regimes, brought to Arab societies a superficial perception, lacking experience, maturity, and openness of the basics of a genuine democratic system. Thus, people who were looking forward to freedom and equality felt a kind of coercion and domination, reminding them of stagnant authoritarian regimes.

1.3 Exacerbation of religious fundamentalisms

The uprisings were coupled with one of the most serious threats to pluralism in Middle Eastern societies, namely the domination by Islamic fundamentalism of a part of the Arab conscience mobilizing it to defend what they considered the pure foundations of Islam, to take revenge against fallen political regimes, and to oppose the expected intellectual, technical, and military western invasion. In fact, some of these Islamic fundamentalisms support a vision of humanity which is closed and rigid and contrary to the reality of universal pluralism which has been ordained by God. Some others justify sacred violence under the pretext of serving the divine law. In this context, what is a source of concern is that Islamic fundamentalisms are giving rise to a counter reaction of other religious fundamentalisms, the most dangerous of which is Jewish fundamentalism which exploits the Islamic fundamentalist phenomenon to justify before western societies the distasteful aberrations of Zionism in Palestine.

1.4 Persistence of some of the authoritarian Arab regimes

Not all Arab societies have benefited from uprisings. Some Arab regimes based on family, religious, racial, or tribal tyranny continue to circumvent uprisings, thinking that military or financial power will exempt them from historical accountability, and that the volatility

in the Arab world will calm down and result in new situations and alternatives that they will be able to co-opt, in order to keep their power.

1.5 Political corruption, economic dislocation, and social injustice

Arab societies suffer from different forms of political corruption, economic dislocation, and social injustice. The successive political regimes which ruled Arab societies since the mid-twentieth century were characterized by corruption, clientelism, and intellectual sterility in reaping the fruits of the resources of the Arab world, impoverishing people and restricting wealth to ruling families and a few influential investors who were complicit with those who were in power. Therefore, such societies lack the minimum infrastructure supporting social, educational, and health development.

2. Christians and changes in the region

2.1 It is now the time for all the people of the Middle East to take a moment for reflection and learning and to call for a new covenant of coexistence which respects human dignity and will create a model of governance which takes seriously the need for consultation, through which free thought and genuine democracy will be cherished. The Christians of the Middle East are determined to take advantage of this promising historical moment to participate in illuminating political discourse and to bring about a concept of citizenship in which every human being feels equal to each other, with their innate individual rights, worth and dignity under the rule of law respected. Only such a citizenship guarantees all people of the Middle East the enjoyment of a free and flourishing life. As for suspicious alliances between minorities, the seeking of aid from the West, colluding against fellow citizens, these are incompatible with noble gospel values and faith in the hope of the resurrection.

2.2 Nobody ignores the magnitude of challenges and risks that the Christian existence in the Middle East is facing. The churches of the Middle East need today to repent sincerely, shaking off the dust of former compromises and collaboration. The Christian Church does not indulge in hypocrisy, nor does it collude with political authorities when they are corrupted for their own self-interest. The churches in the Middle East are aware that the guarantee of our free and proactive Christian existence in the Arab world is not a bequest given by political powers, but is acquired by being courageous in exposing the structures and mechanisms of oppressive political systems, and by persistent patience in changing mentalities and structures. Isolation from the Arab world and sectarian inwardness are not what guarantee a flourishing life and the vitality of the witness of the Christians of the Middle East. In the context of this comprehensive moral repentance, the churches of the region must find ways to strengthen the means of encounter and solidarity within the framework of the Middle East Council of Churches which brings together the Christians. It is the most prominent ecumenical body on which many hopes were built at the time it was established, and to which generous individuals have always been committed.

2.3 Therefore, the Christians of the Middle East must hold on to their Christian hope in order to negotiate actively with this troubled reality. They urgently need to remind all their fellow citizens to distinguish clearly between religious matters and political ones, so

that the state is not based on religious affiliation, but on a unique national identity. From the Christian perspective, the state should be a neutral administrative body of no religious affiliation. Christians shall therefore work to prepare a cultural renaissance in which faith inspires individual and collective human conscience and existence, and which liberates the state from the bondage of confessional affiliation and sectarian disputes. It is a renaissance that the Christians of the Middle East have always sought, in their conviction that it releases the state from the evils of religious intolerance and political decadence. In fact, a healthy human society should be established on the principle of full respect for original human rights linked to the intrinsic human character, and from this proceeds human freedom and total equality in rights and duties. Societies rising up against injustice and despotism should not re-establish their constitutions on a basis that ignores the human pluralism which enriches our Arab societies.

2.4 The Christians of the Middle East should not submit to the current troubled realities of their societies. The current convulsions have not so far resulted in an intellectual awakening that meets the aspirations of the vast majority of the people of the Middle East. All are equal in this present tribulation. However, Christians are experiencing in this current historical situation dangerous challenges to their existence. Nonetheless in the past they faced even more severe challenges and demonstrated through faith that they are able to transcend such crises and find intelligent solutions to safeguard for themselves and their societies the building blocks of decent human life. That is why they are today, especially members of the younger generations, already mobilizing to overcome difficulties and obstacles, inspired by their faith, and their intellectual, and moral Christian legacy, in order to contribute actively to restoring the image of human beings and society. If these young generations understand the essence of their divine mission to reform and help their societies to advance and progress, they will no longer retreat and emigrate, and will instead get involved in this important work for the revival of humanity in the region.

3. The Message of the Christians of the Middle East

3.1 By holding this conference of Middle Eastern Christians, we state our commitment to persevere in our Christian witness, based on the strength of our faith, the spirit of hope, and the weapon of love. Our aim is to reinforce our determination and renew our pursuit of living together with our brothers and sisters in this region and walking with them on the road to elevate human beings to the level for which all our hearts strive. While hoping that divine love prevails in our societies, the noble gospel testimony must guide us in dealing with ourselves and with our partners.

3.2 Our message to ourselves, people of Christian faith, is that our nations are not places of transience or exploitation, but of serious engagement and witness. God has made us in the Middle East witnesses of divine forbearance, universal brother and sisterhoods, and honest human and peaceful co-existence. In spite of our weakness, God planted in us a significant spiritual force and the human power to collaborate with other people in the Arab world to heal our infirmities. Our testimony here in this region requires first of all

showing by words and acts that our societies must be guided by the Universal Charter of Human Rights and the spirit of the gospel beatitudes. These are our two main charters.

3.3 Our message to the people of the Muslim faith is that we eagerly desire to discover the reality of our oriental Christian existence as an integral part of the reality of the Arab world. We are glad when we see our Muslim partners seeking honestly to understand the reality of Christianity in the region and feel its preoccupations, disruptions, troubles, and existential concerns. Even though we are smaller in number, we appreciate their honest determination to maintain a free, active and fruitful, Christian presence in the life of Arab societies and insisting on maintaining our partnership for the planning of future Arab existence on the political, economic, social, and cultural levels. We call upon them to look at us and at themselves without being influenced by obsolete religious and political stereotypes, so that we can formulate together a new covenant of coexistence which protects pluralism within our societies, honours diversity, and enables the people of the Middle East to live a prosperous and decent life.

3.4 Our message to the people of the Jewish faith, whose religious legacy belongs to the same noble Semitic cultural environment as Christians and Muslims, is that their prophetic books urge them to renounce disunity and discord, love the neighbour, to be hospitable to strangers, and to support the oppressed. From all peoples, God demands mercy and not sacrifices. There is no doubt that many faithful Jews have criticized Israeli governments for violating the values of their heritage of faith. Christians and Muslims count on this group of faithful Jews to join those who respect human rights in the Palestinian territories and promote the value of coexistence between Palestinians and Israelis.

3.5 Our message to the radical Islamists who reject others in his or her otherness and difference is that the region does not tolerate extremism and intolerance, because this region is the place of revelation, and the cradle of virtue, and truth. Local Christians understand what lies behind some shifts in traditional Arab Islam. This includes destructive western interventions in Arab lands, Zionist aggression, and the corruption of Arab political regimes. Therefore, they urge Islamic political movements in Arab societies to reject violence and adopt dialogue and rational ways of thinking illuminated by faith. It is not beneficial for radical Islamists to try to eradicate in our region all the aspects of cultural and religious diversity, which are an essential part of our noble Semitic heritage, under the pretext of being determined to obliterate evil and make right prevail. They must sit with us in forums to discuss seriously the social, economic, intellectual, and religious problems of Arab existence. Out of this joint discussion would come the hoped for Arab covenant for coexistence.

3.6 This is our message and we acknowledge the efforts and determination this struggle will require, along with repentance on the part of the Christians of the Middle East. It is a great endeavour for which the churches must mobilize all their members, knowing that the Holy Spirit that Jesus gave to His apostles at the time of Pentecost is active now and is purifying, reforming, and renewing our world.