



For action

**FORCED DISPLACEMENT, REFUGEES AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS (IDPs)
IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

*So you also must love outsiders. Remember that you yourselves were outsiders in Egypt.
(Deuteronomy 10:19, NIRV)*

Christians are called by scripture and our faith to respond to the situation of refugees, displaced people and those fleeing violence and oppression.

Our Lord Jesus Christ himself became, in his infancy, a child refugee when *“an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt”*.¹

Jesus’ ministry is an example and invocation to welcome, hospitality, inclusion, and service to all. Jesus identified himself especially with the outsider and the dispossessed, and taught his followers that when they fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, and visited the sick and those in prison, they were doing it to him. When they failed to do so, they failed to serve him.²

In December 2012, UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres convened a Dialogue with faith leaders, faith-based humanitarian organizations, academics and government representatives from countries around the world on the theme of “Faith and Protection.” As the High Commissioner noted in his opening remarks, “...all major religious value systems embrace humanity, caring and respect, and the tradition of granting protection to those in danger. The principles of modern refugee law have their oldest roots in these ancient texts and traditions.” As an outcome of this event, faith-based organizations – including the World Council of Churches – collaborated in drafting “Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders” to help inspire religious leaders to “welcome the stranger” with dignity, respect and loving support.

The world is currently experiencing a crisis of forced displacement unprecedented in the modern era, with over 50 million people now living as refugees or internally displaced persons (IDPs) globally. On average, more than 30,000 people are fleeing from their homes every single day due to conflict or other causes of insecurity. While media attention and

¹ Matthew 2:13-15

² Matthew 25:31-45

humanitarian financing is relatively easier to attract during emergencies, refugee and displacement situations invariably last much longer than the emergencies. The average amount of time a refugee spends in exile and uncertainty is 17 years.

The Middle East region is at the epicentre of the worst forced displacement crisis in a generation. In particular, the brutal and intractable conflict in Syria has generated massive population displacement from and within the country. Over 3 million Syrians – half of them children – have been forced to flee their country, while another 7.6 million people are displaced within Syria.

In Iraq, the paroxysm of violence in mid-2014 in which the so-called 'Islamic State' swept across the north of the country drove fresh waves of displacement, in a country with almost a million existing IDPs who had fled violence in previous years. More than 800,000 newly displaced people sought safety in the Kurdistan region, where a WCC staff delegation visited in August 2014. The WCC delegation brought back first-hand testimonies from members of the displaced communities – Christians, Yazidis and Muslim groups – targeted by the extremists. The delegation observed the overwhelming numbers of people being cared for by the regional authorities, churches and other religious or social institutions, or staying in construction sites, in tents, or in the open, often facing a harsh winter without adequate shelter or clothing. An estimated total of 1.9 million Iraqis have been internally displaced so far this year. Meanwhile, the north of Iraq received a further surge in the numbers of Syrians fleeing Kobane in Syria, via Turkey, adding to the 214,000 Syrian refugees already in Iraq, mostly in the Kurdistan region.

In these and other situations in the region, religious and social diversity is gravely and dramatically jeopardized, and Christians are among those especially affected. Christians are indigenous to the Middle East, having been present since the dawn of Christianity. Their continued presence is essential for the maintenance of diversity and pluralism in the social fabric of the region also in the future.

The exceptionally large new refugee outflows especially from Syria have put the social, political, economic and security situation in neighbouring countries in severe peril. Nevertheless, particularly Lebanon and Jordan, as well as Turkey and Iraq, have demonstrated generosity in receiving and assisting the Syrian refugees.

Lebanon has received more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees, increasing its population by one quarter and giving it the highest concentration of refugees per capita in the world. In Jordan, the Zaatari refugee camp has grown to become the country's third largest 'city'. While offering exceptional hospitality to refugees and displaced people, host communities in these countries are experiencing great stress and hardship in doing so. The health, education and other social services available in Lebanon and Jordan cannot meet the overwhelming needs of citizens and refugee populations combined. The Middle East Council of Churches, ACT Alliance and its members, together with local churches and humanitarian organizations, are deeply engaged in responding to these situations, but additional international support is critically needed to help meet the vast unmet need.

In these circumstances, it is often children who suffer the consequences. For example, while both Lebanon and Jordan have in principle allowed Syrian refugees to access health and education services, due to lack of needed resources and inadequate infrastructure less than 20% of the refugee children in Lebanon actually attend school, and the additional burden on the education system in Jordan has put it under severe strain.

The burden being borne by these countries is unsustainable and unjust, and this injustice compounds the tragedy of the displaced people and communities. The international community must exert maximum efforts to promote a just resolution of the situations of conflict and oppression driving the population displacements in order to ensure a sustainable peace, and to enable refugees and IDPs to return to their homes should they wish to do so. In the meantime, opportunities for refugees to be resettled elsewhere have in practice been minimal. In the past 2 years, fewer than 150,000 refugees have been resettled in other countries.

Faced with the overflow of refugees and displaced persons in the neighbouring host countries, and with the slow and woefully inadequate response of wealthier states outside the region, the desperate are increasingly driven into the hands of people smugglers. More and more of those with the means to pay the smugglers' exorbitant demands are putting their lives at terrible risk for even the slimmest chance of a brighter future.

In addition, especially in the context of the Syria crisis, displacement and the risk of statelessness for refugee children are inextricably linked. Children can only acquire nationality through their fathers under current Syrian law, but many Syrian refugee children have been separated from their fathers due to the conflict. Additionally, many Syrian refugee children fled the country before ever having obtained documentation proving that they are Syrian nationals. Unless this can be resolved at a later date, these children may be left stateless. There are also very low levels of birth registration among Syrian refugee children born in exile in the main host countries, now numbering over 70,000. Without birth registration, it becomes difficult for them to prove that they have acquired nationality by descent from a Syrian father.

For children, statelessness brings with it special risks and vulnerabilities. While every child is entitled to official protection against exploitation and abuse, stateless children have no such guarantee. Lack of documents proving nationality and age leaves them without adequate legal protection, and at particular risk of trafficking for economic and sexual exploitation, forced marriage and forced labour.

The recent developments in Syria and Iraq have added to the existing long-term forced displacement crisis in the wider Middle East. In Israel-Palestine, the Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip in July 2014 caused the biggest wave of displacement and the highest number of civilian casualties since 1967. Displacement has also continued in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, where the policies and practices of occupation (including restrictive and discriminatory residency regulations and construction policies) and settlement expansion continue to cause the systematic and definitive displacement of an increasing number of people.

There are around 2 million UNRWA³-registered Palestinian refugees in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and 3 million Palestinian refugees in the surrounding countries of Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. For Palestinians, refugee status is passed down from one generation to the next.

The WCC Executive Committee is meeting in Cyprus, one of the sites of the earliest Christian outreach beyond the Holy Land, but a place with its own painful modern history of conflict, displacement, occupation and division. As consequences of this, as many as 200,000 Greek Cypriots and 65,000 Turkish Cypriots were displaced, many churches and communities were destroyed or abandoned, and at least 1,600 people remain missing and unaccounted for. And today a still divided Cyprus stands at the very edge of the region bearing the heaviest burden of the current global crisis of forced displacement.

Concerned for the future of the displaced people and for the stability of the societies of the region, the Executive Committee of the World Council of Churches:

- **Expresses** appreciation to the governments and authorities of neighbouring host countries, especially Lebanon and Jordan, for keeping their borders open to those fleeing conflict and oppression.
- **Calls on** other countries urgently to increase their financial and material support to host country governments and to local and international efforts to care for and to protect the refugees and displaced persons, sharing the burden more equitably with the most affected host countries and communities.
- **Urges** all parties to the conflicts driving the destruction and displacement in Syria, Iraq and Israel-Palestine to respect the dignity and rights of all human beings, to observe all the principles of international humanitarian law concerning the protection of civilians, and to bring an end to these conflicts and injustices so that refugees and displaced people may return to their homes in conditions of safety and dignity.
- **Stresses** the critical importance of securing the conditions under which the Christian presence can be strengthened in the Middle East region, with due protection of the rights and dignity of all, as a foundation for pluralism and democratic and social development in the societies of the region.
- **Appeals** to WCC member churches and partners to support local churches in their efforts to provide the means of survival for vulnerable communities affected by the conflicts in Syria and Iraq.
- **Requests** all potential resettlement countries to increase and expedite their intake of refugees, in order to mitigate the long-term impact on the lives and livelihoods of the victims of forced displacement and on the societies and economies of the most affected host countries.
- **Calls on** the international humanitarian community and the authorities of the host countries to redouble their efforts to avoid statelessness among the refugee populations, particularly among children, including by simplifying registration

³ United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

procedures and documentation requirements for substantiating identity and marriage.

- **Underlines** the need for stronger national and international collaborative efforts for the more effective protection of refugees and displaced persons.
- **Recommends** that all states that have not already done so sign, ratify and implement the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1954 and 1961 Statelessness Conventions.
- **Urges** all political leaders from both Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities to overcome hostilities, divisions and injustices and to bring negotiations on the future of Cyprus to a successful and just conclusion, as an essential foundation for sustainable peace and development.
- **Encourages** religious leaders from both communities in their efforts (through the 'Religious Track' of the Cyprus Peace Process) to continue inter-religious and inter-communal reconciliation and cooperation for peace, justice and respect for the human and religious rights of all people in Cyprus and to provide a sign of hope to the wider region, and invites all WCC member churches to support and accompany them in prayer and solidarity.
- **Invites** all churches and Christians to deepen their reflection on the Christian calling to welcome the stranger, and to widen the care they provide for those in need, making use of and promoting the resource "Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders".