MIDDLE EAST
OVERVIEW

July 2019
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1. BACKGROUND

The month of July witnessed great progress concerning the issue of the freedom of religion: the U.S State Department pioneered the largest religious freedom gathering in the world, as reported by various media outlets. By doing so it has set up a new alliance that seeks to protect people from persecution and to safeguard places of worship, while instilling a wide a variety of measures. Although the second Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom (July 16 to 18), which was attended by MECC, attracted massive attention from the media and has gathered more than 1,000 participants from more than 130 countries, the event was preceded during the same month in the Middle East, by a bombing of a Church in Qamishli in Syria. Luckily, there were no deaths reported. As tragic this event was, the conference seems to foreshadow more serious endeavors to combat religious persecution.

The MECC during July, in the same context, has convened with Denmark’s Ministry of Freedom of Religion or Belief Ambassador, to form a lasting partnership. Since we are in a new era, where the freedom of religion is increasingly becoming a focal point, the MECC, being a forerunner of inter-religious dialogue, will benefit its partners, from the plethora of experience it has in this regard. Concerning the tragic event in Qamishli, it has formerly denounced the terrorist activities while lifting its prayers to those effected by the incident.
2. THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION

Egypt

- A primary budget surplus of 36 billion LE was achieved, surpassing expectations. This meant there is an improvement in public financial tuning, fixing imbalances, reducing differences between income and expenses, and limiting the drain of resources.¹
- Egypt’s latest GDP projection for 2019 is 5.6%.²
- In a bid to increase investments in the country, Egypt’s House of Representatives has approved new amendments to a law that grants citizenship to foreigners who invest in the country. Citizenship will be granted to those who buy state-owned or private property, establish an investment project or deposit cash into an Egyptian bank.³
- According to a poll by Reuters, Egypt’s central bank is likely to maintain interest rates at their current level, despite a spike of fuel prices. Deposits are stable at 15.75% and lending at 16.75%.⁴
- Inflation has sharply decreased from 14.1% in May to 9.4% by the end of June.⁵
- An agreement between the International Finance Corporation (IFC), a member of the World Bank, and Edita for Food Industries, has been signed providing $30 million to enhance Edita’s overseas investments and to generate job opportunities.⁶
- 16.5628 EG/USD official currency exchange rate.⁷

²Ahram Online, July 2, 2019, http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/3/12/337222/Business/Economy/Egypts-GDP-growth-in-budget-was-close-to-Preside.aspx
Jordan

- A Jordan-Italy Commercial forum which was launched on the 1st of July in Amman, focused on the aspect of forming a plan to acquaint Italian companies with the various economic and commercial opportunities in the Kingdom, to enhance economic relations between the two countries.\(^8\)
- Faridon Hartouqa, Acting Jordan Investment Commission (JIC) chairman, met with the China-Arab States Technology Transfer Centre’s general manager and a delegation of Chinese company representatives. The chairman stressed that Jordan is a gateway for Chinese companies to enter regional markets and encouraged Chinese companies to further invest in Jordan.\(^9\)
- During a meeting between Minister of Industry, Trade and Supply Tareq Hammouri and Palestinian Minister of National Economy Khalid Oseili, it was decided that the countries should activate the door-to-door transport system to facilitate the transport of goods.\(^10\)
- The month of July meant the restoration of full diplomatic ties between Qatar and Jordan, after the high-profile visit to Jordan in April. The Jordanian government has set the current secretary-general of the Foreign Ministry, Zaid al-Lawzi, as its next ambassador to Doha. As for Qatar, it proposed Sheikh Saudi bin Nasser bin Jasem as its ambassador to Amman.\(^11\)
- The EU has donated to Jordan, as the second and final tranche of the Macro-Financial Assistance programme, 100 million Euros.\(^12\)
- 1.428 USD Jordanian official currency value.\(^13\)

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\(^13\) http://statisticaldb.cbj.gov.jo/index?action=level4
Iraq

- The Iraqi oil ministry claimed that Iraq had exported more than 105 million barrels of crude oil the previous month, bringing in revenue of over 6 billion U.S. dollars.\textsuperscript{14}
- The liberated provinces from ISIS, Diyala, Salaheddin, Nasiri, Dhi Qar, are set to undergo major reconstruction by major oil companies. However, funds have only been earmarked, and companies still wait for the situation to stabilize.\textsuperscript{15}
- During a meeting between Iraqi officials and Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the European Commission, the latter promised to rebuild Iraq with EU support despite current regional tensions.\textsuperscript{16}
- China State Engineering Corp, a major state construction giant, is seeking to expand its investments in Iraq and is looking for new infrastructure-rebuilding projects.\textsuperscript{17}
- Siemens will supply gas, steam turbines, generators, and power equipment for 840MW power plant in Iraq, as part of its long-term support to expand Iraq’s power infrastructure.\textsuperscript{18}
- A Turkish diplomat was assassinated in Erbil ramping up tensions in the region and with Turkey.\textsuperscript{19}
- 539 Dinar/USD Iraqi official currency exchange rate.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{14}Xinhuanet, July 2, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/02/c_138192731.htm
\textsuperscript{15}Hellenicshipping News, July 15, 2019, https://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/oil-companies-earmark-investment-for-iraqs-liberated-areas/
\textsuperscript{16}Rudaq, July 14, 2019, https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/140720192
\textsuperscript{18}Zawya, July 09, 2019
https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/companies/story/Siemens_to_supply_power_equipment_and_services_for_840
MW_power_plant_in_Iraq-ZAWYA20190709084125/
\textsuperscript{19}Rudaw, July 19, 2019, https://www.rudaw.net/english/analysis/18072019
\textsuperscript{20}http://www.cbiraq.org/DataValues.aspx?dtFrm=10/31/2003&dtTo=02/18/2019&tmlD=175&dtformat=MMM,yyyy
Lebanon

- Parliament’s Finance and Budget Committee reduced the draft 2019 state budget’s deficit to 6.59 percent of GDP, down from 7.59 in the draft approved by Cabinet, by reducing government spending (by 360 million USD).  
  
- An improvement in deposit growth and an increase in foreign currency reserves is expected, due to the increased banks’ interest rates on large sums blocked for three years.
  
- According to Moody’s assessment, Lebanon still risks debt rescheduling due to slowing capital inflows to Lebanon and weaker deposit growth despite fiscal consolidation measures in the 2019 draft budget.
  
- The World Bank during a meeting with PM Saad Hariri, has reiterated that the institution is interested in the sectors of electricity, transport and communications, should they be liberalized. This move will create lots of jobs for many young people.
  
- In an attempt to attract investments from the UAE, Lebanese Economy and Trade Minister Mansour Bteish sent an appeal for investments to UAE Ambassador to Lebanon Hamad Saeed Al Shamsi.
  
- Saudi Arabia, after a meeting with three Lebanese ex-prime ministers in Jeddah, confirmed that it will be preparing to help Lebanon through its economic challenges.
  
- 1507.5 LBP/ USD Lebanon official currency exchange rate.

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Palestine

- In an attempt to save the Palestinian authority from its critical financial situation, a group of Palestinian business owners are to loan the government a sum of 150-200 million USD for the next three months.\(^{27}\)
- In a gesture of solidarity to the Palestinian cause, Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi announced his rejection of the yet-undisclosed US peace plan – known as the “deal of the century” during a visit of his counterpart Mohammed Shtayyeh.\(^{28}\)
- In cooperation with the EU and the French Development Agency, the Palestinian authority is working on a 20.3 million USD project to provide renewable energy to help power West Bank.\(^{29}\)
- The spokeswoman for the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Agnes von der Mühll, reaffirmed that France will back a two-state solution.\(^{30}\)

Syria

- After his meeting with Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of Syria, the Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs Vladimir Makei, announced that his country is ready to invest in Syria to restore the country’s infrastructure and economy.\(^{31}\)
- 52 new craft and industrial facilities in Dar’a have entered the production stage with a capital estimated at SYP 1.422 billion over the first half of the current year as they have provided 218 job opportunities.\(^{32}\)
- During the month of July, several companies witnessed a crackdown from the government’s Finance Ministry as it attempts to increase taxation on institutions it deems profitable. Analysts have warned that this move will lead to a slow-down in investment as stakeholders, after knowing of such a move can scare off potential investors.\(^{33}\)

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33 FT, July 25, 2019 https://www.ft.com/content/a7a75e4c-a95d-11e9-984c-fac8325aaa04
• The U.N.'s special envoy for Syria is reporting "solid progress" following talks with officials in the Syrian capital and says they are "very close to an agreement" on establishing a constitutional committee.  

• UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, cited during this month, a major violation in human rights as more than 100 people, including 26 children, have died in air strikes in just 10 days.  

• Official Current Exchange Rate SP/USD: 435

Cyprus

• According to Finance Minister Harris Georgiadis, the GDP for this year to be slightly below 3.5% at around 3.3% or 3.4%.  

• In a recent poll by the Statistical Service, the unemployment level in Cyprus fell by 20.4% or 4,848 persons from last year.  

• A new third satellite casino has been opened in the city of Ayia Napa to enhance the city’s tourism and significantly contribute to the sustainable growth of the island’s economy.  

• In a bid to increase regional influence, Turkey has vocalized that drilling for oil and gas on Cypriot waters is within its rights. This move exacerbated tensions with Cyprus and the EU.  

• 1.126 USD Euro official currency value

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3. THE REFUGEE SITUATION

Egypt

- The National Defense and Security Committee of the Egyptian House of Representatives discussed the measures taken by the Ministry of the Interior to secure refugees while maintaining Egyptian national security. The committee stressed on the importance of protecting the refugees, treating them humanely, and protecting them from being taken advantage of by terrorist groups.\(^{41}\)

- The 102nd round of the Conference of Supervisors of Palestinian Affairs in Arab Host Countries convened in Cairo to stress on the importance of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and compensate them, rejecting all attempts aimed at settling them in other countries. Moreover, the conference called upon the international community to renew the mandate of the UNHCR, urging donor countries to increase their financial contributions to support the reconstruction of Nahr El Bared refugee camp in Lebanon. The conference also highlighted the importance of member countries to pay their financial pledges.\(^{42}\)

- An Egyptian lawyer lodged an official complaint in which he called for imposing tighter supervision on Syrians’ assets, sparking distress among refugees who are fearful for their investments.\(^{43}\)

Jordan

The UNHCR states that there are currently 662,010 registered refugees in Jordan up until July.

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

- 195,321 in Amman Governorate (29.5%)
- 162,399 in Mafraq Governorate (24.6%)
- 137,354 in Irbid Governorate (20.8%)
- 95,360 in Zarqa Governorate (14.4%)
- 18,969 in Balqa Governorate (2.9%)
- 13,210 in Madaba Governorate (2%)
- 9,680 in Jarash Governorate (1.5%)
- 8,856 in Karak Governorate (1.3%)
- 8,134 in Maan Governorate (1.2%)

\(^{41}\)RT, July 10, 2019, https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/1031364-


• 6,781 in Ajlun Governorate (1.0%)
• 3,541 in Aqaba Governorate (0.5%)
• 1,683 in Tafilah Governorate (0.3%)

- In a recent study conducted by UNHCR, Jordan has issued 139,492 work permits up until end of June. 44
- During a workshop on "Health Care for Refugees in Humanitarian Crisis Situations" organized by the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, The Higher Population Council Secretary General Abla Amawi stressed on the importance of activating the role of the Ministry of Education, although the Jordanian government had made significant progress in assisting refugees. 45
- The UNRWA has warned that 30% of the Palestinians coming from Syria are highly vulnerable. It also stated that nearly 100% are in need of a winterization project. 46

Iraq
The UNHCR states that there are currently 253,371 registered Syrian refugees in Iraq.

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

- 129,877 in Erbil (51.3%)
- 88,457 in Dahuk (35%)
- 31,514 in Sulaymaniyah (12.7%)
- 1,102 in Anbar (0.4%)
- 2,033 in other areas (0.8%) 47

While there is 1,665,108 IDPs, The UNHCR states that there are currently 364,612 Iraqi people who have displaced in Iraq for the month of June.

The UNHCR registered Iraqi IDP movement up until the end of June, in the following governorates:

- 16,028 in Erbil (4.3%)
- 137,507 in Dahuk (37.7%)
- 15,160 in Sulaymaniyah (4.1%)
- 15,513 in Anbar (4.2%)

- 153,499 in Ninewa (42%)
- 26,905 in other areas (7.3%) 48

- The UNHCR up until June, has only received 15% of the requested (602.5 M) funding.49
- Since many IDP’s have lost their ID cards and official documents needed to vote, the Independent High Electoral Commission of Iraq has extended the biometric voter card registration period around the country.50
- On the 15th of July, the Iraqi Ministry of Migration announced that over 423 IDPs were returned home from camps in the east and south of the city of Mosul to their home areas across Nineveh province.51
- The regional director of the World Health Organization Dr. Ahmed Al Mandhari, during his visit to Iraq, announced plans for a strategic shift in WHO’s work in the country. This year, WHO’s focus will move from pure emergency response operations to both emergency and developmental activities that aim to rebuild the country’s health system.52

**Lebanon**

Since the beginning of July, the number of registered refugees in Lebanon is 929,624.

Refugees in Lebanon are distributed as follows:

- 341,333 in Bekaa (36.7%)
- 245,292 in North Lebanon (26.4%)
- 234,323 in Beirut (25.2%)
- 108,676 in South Lebanon (11.7%)53

- The Ministry of Social Affairs, UNDP, and UNHCR, have announced that 24% of the 2.62 Billion USD budget has been made available.54

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- Palestinian refugees held protests in Lebanon, in response to the government-imposed restrictions on their work opportunities.55
- In an attempt to force Syrian refugees back to their homeland, the government launched an operation to demolish Syrian shelters in Arsal, sparking outrage among refugees and some human rights groups.56
- According to The International Organization for Migration’s MENA director in a meeting with PM Saad Hariri, about 100,000 refugees in Lebanon have been relocated to Canada, Australia and European countries, up until now.57
- UNESCO organized this month, “emotional agility” training workshop that aimed to empower women by building their capacity to face setbacks, deal with stress, manage negative feelings and cope with difficulties. 60 refugee women attended the workshop.58
- The UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States – Beirut and Kayany Foundation launched the UNESCO Middle Schools to Support Syrian Refugees’ Education in Lebanon.59
- King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center signed in Riyadh a contract to provide medical and psychosocial care services for Syrian refugees in Lebanon with a total value of 1,105,000 USD for the sake of 6,000 people.60

Syria

Humanitarian Need Overview Quick Summary:

- Some 11.7 million people require humanitarian assistance, including 5.9 million people internally displaced.
- 5 million people in acute need of humanitarian assistance.
- Some 15.5 million people require access to safe water, including 6.2 million people experiencing an acute level of water, sanitation and hygiene needs.
- Some 13.2 million people in need of Health care.

- 9 million people in need of food assistance.
- 6 million people in need of education services.
- 4.7 million people in need of nutrition.
- 4.7 million people in need of shelter
- Out of the estimated 8.44 million children living in the Syrian Arab Republic, 5 million require humanitarian assistance and over 3.1 million children under 5 years require nutritional support, as well as 1.6 million pregnant and lactating women.
- 2.1 million Children aged 5 to 17 years out of school and 1.3 million children at risk of dropping out.
- An estimated 577,219 newborns will require routine immunization across Syria, with an estimated 320,000 children between 13 and 59 months of age not fully vaccinated during their first years of life.
- 83% of Syrians live below the poverty line.

**IDP Spontaneous Returns of June (reported in July):**

In June 2019, the humanitarian community recorded 21,652 spontaneous IDP returnees in several areas across Syria. The largest number of these returns were recorded in Deir-ez-zor governorate with 4,763 returnees, mostly from Al-Hasakeh and Damascus governorates. The second largest number of returns were recorded in Idlib governorate with 4,541 returnees who were almost exclusively displaced within the governorate. The trend in Idlib suggests that these individuals were displaced recently due to hostilities in northwest Syria, but remained close to their homes in order to return once violence in that particular area has ceased. The third largest number of IDP returnees with 4,077 spontaneous returns were registered in Dar’a governorate, mostly within the governorate, while Homs governorate followed with 3,836 returns, also mostly within the governorate.

**Notes**
- The returns refer to IDP spontaneous returns and does not necessarily follow the global definitions of ‘Returnees’ or durable solutions for IDPs.
- The IDP spontaneous returns includes IDPs returning to their homes or communities of origin.
- The IDP spontaneous returns referred in this monthly report refers to the return movements occurred in the reported period only.
- The process of verification is based on triangulation of verified IDP spontaneous returns reported by different mechanisms and further examined by the IDP TF through cross-checking population numbers from previous years.

**IDPs movement of June (reported in June):**

![Governorate Summary Diagram]

In June 2019, the humanitarian community recorded 113,936 internally displaced people across Syria. More than 70%, 82,302 individuals, were displaced to locations in Idlib governorate with 70,300 being displaced within Idlib governorate and 11,561 individuals being displaced from Hama governorate. The second largest population movement was recorded in Aleppo governorate with a total of 27,741 individuals, including 10,793 arriving from Hama governorate, 11,507 from Idlib governorate, and 5,386 within Aleppo governorate. Overall, this large population movement is due to the ongoing violence in southern Idlib, northern Hama and western Aleppo governorates where people from communities affected by airstrikes, shelling and ground fighting are fleeing to find safety.

**Self-organized Syrian refugee returns to Syria as verified by UNHCR from Jan to 30 June 2019:**

The total number of refugee returns is 41570 disaggregated by country as following:

The total number of returnees from Lebanon is 9676, Jordan 16037, Iraq 3633, Egypt 207, Turkey 12017.
Registered Refugees from Syria:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location name</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Data date</th>
<th>percentage</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>UNHCR, Government of Turkey</td>
<td>13-Jun-19</td>
<td>64.2%</td>
<td>3,614,108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>30-Jun-19</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td>929,624</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>04-Jul-19</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>662,010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>31-May-19</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>252,983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>30-Jun-19</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>131,433</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (North Africa)</td>
<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>30-Nov-18</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>35,713</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Registered Refugees in Syria, July 4, 2019, Photo Credit: UNHCR
Cyprus

- Refugee Support Europe, a European NGO, opened its first center for refugees in Cyprus as part of a pioneering project.61
- A petition by a group of refugees was initiated, requesting from the government to start providing long-term free Greek language courses, to improve their chances of finding a job.62
- Refugees that were marooned at a UK military base for 20 years, were finally resettled in the UK, ending the dispute with British government.63
- To shed light on the struggle of refugees, a musical group “Refugees for Refugees” sponsored by the UNHCR will participate in the 14th Cyprus Rialto World Music Festival.64

4. CHURCH ACTIVITIES

Egypt

- The month of July meant for Egypt the legalization of 127 congregations after operating for years without any government permit.65
- Pope Tawadros II of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of St. Mark, on the 6th of July, ordained 23 new priests, to serve the Churches of the diocesan preaching in Egypt and the Diaspora, including ten for the Cairo churches, two for Alexandria, and five for Essen, three for Australia and one Canadian priest in the diaspora.66

Jordan

- The youth of Saint Georges in Fuheis hosted on the 5th of July, a workshop of the Orthodox Church in Jordan, called "obedience". The workshop, which was presided over by the Archbishop of Madaba, Archbishop Aristopoulos, with the participation of the choir of the Church of St. Nicholas / Al-Sarih, included several lectures on spiritual, church and educational matters.67

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61 Cyprus Mail, July 1, 2019, https://cyprus-mail.com/2019/07/01/giving-refugees-a-sense-of-purpose/
Iraq

- The revamp of damaged buildings in Batnaya in northern Iraq has commenced after the Hungarian Catholic Church has donated 500,000 USD.\(^{68}\)
- During his visit to the governor of Dahuk, Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako, the Patriarch of Babylon of the Chaldeans and head of the Chaldean Catholic Church, discussed the importance of including the Copts in the political process.\(^{69}\)
- This month, the Iraqi city Basra celebrated the reopening of an old Church which was closed during the Iraqi-Iranian war.\(^{70}\)
- Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako participated in a seminar organized by the British Embassy, in which he spoke about Terrorism and religious radicalism in the region.\(^{71}\)

Lebanon

- The Maronite Patriarch Cardinal Mar Bishara Boutros Al-Rahi discussed with Sheikh Ali Bahsoun, the head of a delegation of sheikhs, the current developments in Lebanon and denounced “The Deal of the Century” at the Patriarchal Edifice of Bkerki.\(^{72}\)
- Patriarch Beshara al-Rahi, met with the president of the Lebanese American University Joseph Jabra, discussing situation of university education in Lebanon, and the importance of providing good job prospects for future and current graduates.\(^{73}\)
- Patriarch of Syriac Catholics of Antioch, The Roman Catholic Patriarch Youssef el Absi, met with senior political figures after a mass in the city of Batroun, congratulating the foreign ministry of linking expatriates to Lebanon.\(^{74}\)
- Patriarch Beshara al-Rahi, participated in the Islamic Christian Spiritual Summit held at the Druze Community House in Beirut on the 30th of July. At the meeting he called upon all political parties to resume calm for the sake of people who are suffering. He also reminded that one of the purposes of this meeting is to give hope to people. Furthermore, the summit was held by several religious leaders such as His Beatitude Youssef El-Abesi, the Melkite Greek Patriarch of Antioch, His Beatitude Youhanna X Yazigi, Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, His Holiness Aram I, Catholicos of the Armenian Apostolic Church of Cilicia, Holiness Ignatius Joseph III Yonan, Catholic Patriarch of Antioch

\(^{70}\) https://www.alhurra.com/a/503766/قatholic-church-opens-old-church-in-basra
\(^{71}\) Saint Adday, July 15, 2019, http://saint-adday.com/?p=33521&fbclid=IwAR3B8mQlr4LDoQn6U5uq2vOWVMo7LKsr4WL6glzcnc99BoxWC5BPpSgSeh0
\(^{72}\) IM Lebanon, July 4, 2019, https://www.imlebanon.org/2019/07/04/rahi-bahsoun/
\(^{73}\) IM Lebanon, July 2, 2019, https://www.imlebanon.org/2019/07/02/rahi-tele-lumiere-noursat/
and all the East for the Syriac Catholic Churches, His Beatitude Krikor Bedros XX Gabroyan, the Patriarch of Cilicia of the Armenian Catholic Church in the Beirut Patriarchal See, His Eminence Metropolitan Mar Theophilos Georges Saliba, representative of His Holiness Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, Patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch, Rev. Fr Rweiss of Jerusalem Priest of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Lebanon, Rev. Joseph Kassab Head of the Supreme Council of the Evangelical Community in Syria and Lebanon, Rev. Joseph Kassab Head of the Supreme Council of the Evangelical Community in Syria and Lebanon, MGR. Cesar Essayan, the Apostolic Vicariate of Beirut, represented by Fr. Toufic Bou Merhi, the Maronite archbishop of Beirut, Paul Abdel Sater, His Beatitude Mar Meelis Zaia AM, Metropolitan of Australia, New Zealand and Lebanon, represented by Father Kifarkis Yohanna, and Reverend Riad Jarjoura.75

Palestine

- The Greek Orthodox Church petitioned against a ruling of Israel’s Supreme Court which approved the sale of church property in East Jerusalem’s Old City to pro-settlement group Ateret Cohanim.76
- Archbishop Atallah Hanna, Archbishop of Sebastia of the Greek Orthodox, received a delegation from the Commission on Human Rights in Geneva. He explained to the delegation, during his visit to the Church of the Resurrection, what is happening in the city of Jerusalem regarding the targeting of people and their homes, as well as the Islamic and Christian holy sites.77

Syria

- His Holiness Ignatius Aphrem II, the Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church, condemned the bombing of Church of Virgin Mary in the city of Qamishli.78
- Aid to the Church in Need has launched a new appeal consisting of two new projects to help Christians in Syria. One is in Aleppo, where it will distribute food packages to the poorest Christian families, as well as financial aid to help them acquire gas and heating oil. The move by this Faith Based Organization have been influenced by the Greek-Melkite Patriarch Youssef Absi, who has asked for help to obtain medicine and home medical care for seriously ill Christians.79

On the 22\textsuperscript{nd} of July, President Bashar El Assad received a written message from His Holiness Pope Francis conveyed by Cardinal Peter Tarkson, President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Integrated Human Development. In his message, His Holiness reiterated his support for the restoration of stability in Syria and the suffering of the Syrian people as a result of the war and its aftermath.\textsuperscript{80}

**Cyprus**

- To celebrate the independence of the Philippines, the Saint Catherine Catholic Church in Limassol, graciously opened its doors for such an event.\textsuperscript{81}
- Archbishop Chrysostomos II of the Greek Orthodox Church, met with Armenian Parliament speaker Ararat Mirzoyan, to highlight the fraternity between the people of Armenia and Cyprus which have created a strong friendship that proceeds from mutual adherence to universal human values. They both agreed that the two nations are tightly connected by an identical value system, a common history and culture.\textsuperscript{82}
- Representing the Church of Cyprus and His Beatitude Archbishop Chrysostomos II, Metropolitan Gerorgios of Paphos attended the Enthronement of Archbishop Makarios of Australia in Sydney.\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{80} Sana, July 22, 2019, https://www.sana.sy/?p=983290
\textsuperscript{82} News Am, July 6, 2019, https://news.am/eng/news/522491.html
5. **MECC HEADQUARTERS ACTIVITIES**

**MECC convenes with WCC (July 2-4)**

The Middle East Council of Churches, represented by the Secretary General Dr. Souraya Bechealany, attended a meeting, hosted by the World Council of Churches at the Bossey Ecumenical Institute, Switzerland. The event gathered other organizations such as the All Africa Conference of Churches, Christian Conference of Asia, Caribbean Conference of Churches, Conference of European Churches, Canadian Council of Churches, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, and the Pacific Conference of Churches.

![The participants at the Bossey Ecumenical Institute, July 2-4, Photo Credit: Marcelo Schneider/WCC](image)

In addition to sharing news and concerns from each region, the group identified common concerns such as peace in the Middle East and discussed problems relating to justice, racism, and the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. Participants also determined and planned ways to enhance cooperation and joint action. For instance, the ecumenical leaders received and shared ways of strengthening their communication together, and where updated on preparations for the WCC 11th Assembly to be held in Karlsruhe, Germany in 2021. Moreover, during the meeting, WCC General Secretary Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit claimed that the WCC will invest in more staffing capacity in relation to the regional work to develop and facilitate closer collaboration.
Danish Ministerial Visit (July 9)

A delegation from the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs visited the MECC headquarters in Beirut, where it got acquainted with the Council’s activities and discussed the status of religious freedom in the Middle East, as well as future ways for cooperation.

MECC condemns Qamishli Bombing (July 11)

The Middle East Council of Churches condemned the terrorist bombing which took place on Thursday July 11, 2019, in front of the Church of Our Lady in Qamishli-Syria. In a phone call to His Holiness Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church, MECC Secretary General Dr Souraya Bechealany
denounced this criminal act and declared complete solidarity with the Syriac Orthodox Church, especially the faithful in Qamishli.

Dr Bechealany, in her own words said that “our faith will not falter before this treacherous crime nor will our determination waver. We will still defend human dignity and support the efforts to establish peace and spread the culture of dialogue, love and reconciliation “.

Dr. Bechealany and His Holiness Aphrem lifted common prayers for the victims of the bombing, hoping to be healed. Together with the Churches of the Middle East they invoked God’s grace for security and peace for the Euphrates and Al-Jazira regions.

**MECC participates in the “Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom”**
**(July 15-18)**

For the second year in a row, the MECC, represented by Rev. Dr. Habib Badr, President of the National Evangelical Union in Lebanon and of the MECC Evangelical Family, participated in the “Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom” conference, which was organized by the US Department of State at its headquarters in Washington DC.
The conference, which took place from 15 to 18 July 2019, brought together more than 1,000 people from 114 countries, and was followed by a special meeting of some 80 foreign ministers from around the world. From his end, Rev. Dr. Badr made a special plea during all his contacts, particularly with Bishop Phillip Mounstephen, the Anglican Primate of Truro, insisting that MECC should be seen and treated as the main interlocutor when discussing any issues related to the Christians of the Middle East, or when making decisions regarding their present and future existence.

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Interviewed by Al Hurra TV, Rev. Dr. Badr said that “persecutions over the world against all religions, especially Christians, have reached an unacceptable level”. He added “This is why the actions mentioned by the Religious Freedom Ambassador Sam Brownback, are very much needed among the people and the religious and political leadership”.

Rev. Dr. Habib Badr at the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom Conference, July 15-18, photos credit: MECC website
MECC completes a skills building workshop (July 26)

The MECC team participated in a training workshop in "building and managing the skills of the team", organized by the council and in collaboration with the Institute for Leadership Development, in which the Secretary-General of the Bible Society Dr. Mike Bsous presented the workshop.

The workshops lasted for four months from April to July, where they were divided into three lectures with the following addresses: "the mission, the vision, the goal, the values", "team building and management" and "strategic planning".

In the presence of the Secretary-General of the council, the MECC team discussed way to enhance the effectiveness of organization. Each department concluded the workshop by formulating its own strategic plan for the future.
6. MECC Humanitarian activities July 2019

Lebanon

- Launched a recreational one day camp for children who are not attending a summer program in the area; to include a mixture of crafts, music with short GBV messages. Participants included 39 children: 12 Syrians, 22 Iraqis, and 5 Lebanese.
- Provided Awareness sessions for children aged between 6 and 12 years. They included short GBV messages suitable for the ages about the good touch, bad touch, and bullying. 27 children participated: 14 Syrian and 13 Iraqi.
- Conducted an interactive session with our pediatrics doctor about the benefits of breastfeeding and its nutritional values. The attendees were 14 women: 7 Iraqis and 7 Syrians.
- Launched MHPSS sessions for GBV survivors. The sessions addressed the issue of violence by raising awareness in the women and children in the community. The beneficiaries were: 12 women (5 Iraqis and 7 Syrians) and 10 children (4 Iraqis and 6 Syrians).
- Launched soft skills sessions to teach 12 women (7 Syrians and 5 Iraqis) how to crochet and provide them with a full set of materials that they can take with them and continue to develop their skill at home. The aim of the sessions is to empower them and increase their resiliency.
- Provided a 125-hour course on Home Care for the Elderly in Tripoli Northern Lebanon. 25 men and women attendees will graduate by end of August with a certificate enabling them to carry out this highly in demand practice.
- Launched a Make-Up Training session. Some 22 women graduated from a make-up skills training in Marjeyoun district, South Lebanon.
Recreational Activities with Children, July 1, 2, 3 Photo Credit: ERS Lebanon

GBV with Children, July 5, 12, 26. Photo Credit: ERS Lebanon
Syria

- Continued providing small grants to recover 21 broken businesses in AlZabadani.
- Completed vocational training for 200 beneficiaries in Izraa and AlTal.
- Completed business startup courses for 58 beneficiaries graduated from vocational training in Izraa.
- Launched waste management activities in Maarba and Daraa AlBalad by hiring 80 workers.
- Started the rehabilitation of six public schools in Kherbet Ghazaleh and Daraa AlBalad.
- Completed child protection courses for 62 teachers in Kherbet Ghazaleh and Daraa AlBalad.
- Launched two summer schools in Kherbet Ghazaleh and Daraa AlBalad for 400 students.
- Started the tender process to select contractors to rehabilitate 24 shops in Aleppo and Daraa.
- Distributed 800 hygiene kits for 800 families in Kafar Nasej in Daraa governorate.
- Completed health awareness sessions for 20 women in Aleppo including distribution of blood pressure devices and 80 hygiene kits.
Health Awareness Course for 20 Women in Aleppo, July 2019, Photo Credit: ERS Syria

Child Protection Courses for 62 Teachers in Kherbet Ghazaleh and Daraa AlBalad, July 2019, Photos Credit: ERS Syria
Providing Vocational Training, which include electrical wiring and engine winding, sewing, computer maintenance, blacksmithing, for 200 Beneficiaries in Izraa and Al Tal, July 2019, Photos Credit: ERS Syria
7. **CONCLUSION**

The MECC is confident that the issue of freedom of religion is currently receiving more attention. Therefore, by making use of the current strong appeal for religious freedom, we will continue to back and organize any events or attempts that seek to promote inter-religious dialogue. Thanks to our partners and our highly dedicated staff, the MECC will carry on in shedding light on the subject. Since religion is an integral element in the Middle East way of life, our efforts to bring peoples together, can pave the way for sustainable regional peace.