



مجلس كنائس الشرق الأوسط
The Middle East Council of Churches

Middle East Overview – February 2020

The hidden humanitarian catastroph



Syrian Forced Migrants in the Idlib Governorate, Feb 28, 2020, photo credit: Middle East Institute

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1. BACKGROUND

While the magnitude of United States and Iran’s confrontation has de-escalated from what was seen early in January, another series of events reignited tensions between two regional actors to dangerous heights. In February, Turkey conducted limited skirmishes over Idlib in Syria, while Turkish President Recep Erdogan threatened of a wider operation. As the death toll increases on both sides, a larger conflict is becoming more eminent. But the real concern lies in the massive migratory waves which emanated from such events, as over 900,000 were displaced in North Syria. So the real question remains: what if things spiral out of control? Are we ready for more refugees and displaced people among donor fatigue?

During this month, the MECC actively participated in several conferences, seminars, and meetings in an attempt to cement the ecumenical relations and harness capabilities. The MECC is constantly aware that only through the joint action of the various Church Communities, can we succeed in preserving human dignity and alleviating the tragic situation in the Middle East.



2. THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION

Egypt

- Country Manager of African Development Bank Group (AfDB) Malinne Blomberg during a meeting with Egypt's Minister of International Cooperation Rania El-Mashat, claimed that the AfDB is eager to increase developmental cooperation with Egypt in the coming phase and to cooperate in integrating Egypt economically with Africa.¹
- According to the African Development Bank, Egypt's GDP growth is expected to reach 5.8% in 2020.²
- Karim Helal, managing director of corporate finance and investor relations at Carbon Holding, declared that his company is seeking to invest 11 billion USD in its projects within Egypt.³
- Corys Investments LLC, the UAE family-owned business located in Dubai, announced a joint venture with Georg Fischer (GF) Piping Systems and Egypt Gas to invest up to 21.78 million USD in a major production site for plastic pipes, to take advantage of the soaring Egyptian gas and water distribution market.⁴
- To increase the volume of investments, strengthen bilateral investments, improve higher education, develop the structure of the public business sector, and transfer Swiss expertise and technology to Egypt, Egypt and Switzerland signed three memorandums of understating during the Egyptian-Swiss Investment Forum in Cairo.⁵
- In an attempt to attract further investment, Egypt is considering of offering stakes as much as 100% in some military-linked firms, ranging from agriculture and industry to services and mining.⁶

¹ Ahram, Feb 1, 2020, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/3/12/362674/Business/Economy/AfDB-praises-Egypt%E2%80%99s-economic-performance,-seeks-f.aspx>

² Zawya, Feb 4, 2020, https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/economy/story/Egyptys_GDP_growth_seen_at_58_in_2020__AfDB-SNG_166314125/

³ Mena Fn, Feb 10, 2020, <https://menafn.com/1099679803/Egypt-Governments-infrastructure-projects-to-help-transition-to-industrialisation-Carbon-Holdings-official>

⁴ Oil Review Middle East, Feb 10, 2020, <http://www.oilreviewmiddleeast.com/industry/corys-investments-georg-fischer-and-egypt-gas-form-jv-for-gas-and-water-distribution-market>

⁵ Egypt Today, Feb. 4, 2020, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/3/81283/Egypt-Switzerland-sign-3-MoUs-to-enhance-investment>

⁶ International Investment, Feb 4, 2020, <https://www.internationalinvestment.net/news/4010041/egypt-offer-investors-ownership-military-controlled-companies>



- Under the slogan “North Africa and the Mediterranean: Delivering the Energy Needs of Tomorrow,” the Egypt Petroleum Show (EGYPS 2020) was held, attracting 30,000 attendees, over 450 exhibiting companies to deliver growth within the Egyptian and North African hydrocarbon sector.⁷
- 15.6783 EG/USD official currency exchange rate.⁸

Jordan

- According to the World Bank Group's (WBG) 2020 Doing Business (DB) report, Jordan ranked fourth in the 'getting credit' indicator.⁹
- The Ministry of Industry, Trade and Supply of Jordan signed a memorandum of understanding with Armenia's Ministry of Economy on the grounds of enhancing economic cooperation between the two counties.¹⁰
- The government of the Netherlands launched a multi-sector program in Jordan, to enable the private sector, support entrepreneurship, create jobs, and unlock markets.¹¹
- Jordanian Prime Minister Omar Razzaz announced new investment projects located across 12 governorates in Jordan and worth 4.5 million USD to “help contribute to development in the country and create the much-needed job opportunities”.¹²
- Finance Minister Mohamad Al-Ississ and Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Kristalina Georgieva convened to discuss further cooperation and strengthen Jordan's resilience after the IMF's move to allocate 1.3 billion USD.
- 1.428 USD Jordanian official currency value.¹³

⁷ Ahram, Feb 9, 2020, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/3/12/363195/Business/Economy/Highranking-officials-from-US,-France-to-participa.aspx>

⁸ <http://www.cbe.org.eg/en/EconomicResearch/Statistics/Pages/ExchangeRatesListing.aspx>

⁹ Mena Fn, Feb 6, 2020, <https://menafn.com/1099665382/Improved-getting-credit-ranking-will-positively-impact-Jordans-economy-economist>

¹⁰ Massis Post, Feb 10, 2020, <https://massispost.com/2020/02/armenia-and-jordan-sign-cooperation-memorandum/>

¹¹ Jordan Times, Feb 10, 2020, <https://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/netherlands-launches-private-sector-development-programme-jordan-mena>

¹² Xinhua Net, Feb 12, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/13/c_138778536.htm

¹³ <http://statisticaldb.cbj.gov.jo/index?action=level4>



Iraq

- Oil Co.'s Director General Ihsan Abduljabbar, stated that the company will cut crude oil output at the Nahr Bin Omar field to a minimum due to pollution-related concerns.¹⁴
- Iraq exported more than 102 million barrels of crude oil in January, and thus achieving revenues of over 6 billion U.S. dollars, according to Iraq's Oil Ministry.¹⁵
- The First Deputy Chairman of the Economic Policy Committee at the Russian Federation Council claimed that other companies, including "Zarubezhneft, Tatneft and Rosneftegaz" are also showing interest in investing in Iraq's oil and gas sector.¹⁶
- The Trump administration gave Iraq a 45-day waiver allowing it to import gas and electricity from Iran.¹⁷
- According to Planning Minister Nouri Al-Dulaimi, Iraq is expected to complete the Faw Grant Port, one of the world's largest container terminals and which will have a capacity to handle 99 million tonnes annually, on schedule by 2023.¹⁸
- Iraq will be reopening its consulate in Karachi, Pakistan that is seen as vital for the promotion of trade between the two countries.¹⁹
- 1190 Dinar /USD Iraqi official currency exchange rate.²⁰

Lebanon

- During February, clashes erupted between protesters and security forces over the parliament's confidence vote over the new government.²¹

¹⁴ Arab News, Feb 9, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1625116/business-economy>

¹⁵ Hellenic shipping news, Feb 3, 2020, <https://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/iraqs-crude-exports-exceed-102-mln-barrels-in-jan/>

¹⁶ Middle East Monitor, Feb 11, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200211-russian-companies-to-invest-in-iraqs-energy-industry-says-official/>

¹⁷ Annahar, Feb 12, 2020, <https://en.annahar.com/article/1122946-us-gives-iraq-sanctions-waiver-for-vital-iranian-gas-imports>

¹⁸ Hellenic Shipping News, Feb 10, 2020, <https://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/iraqs-faw-port-project-to-be-ready-in-3-years/>

¹⁹ Breccorder, Feb 14, 2020, <https://www.breccorder.com/2020/02/14/570950/iraq-to-reopen-consulate-in-karachi-shortly-diplomat/>

²⁰ <http://www.cbiraq.org/DataValues.aspx?dtFrm=10/31/2003&dtTo=02/18/2019&tMid=175&dtformat=MMM,yyyy>

²¹ Aljazeera, Feb 11, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/lebanon-gov-wins-parliament-confidence-vote-protests-200211151210371.html>



- According to Lebanon's finance minister, the country is still undecided whether to pay or default on its \$1.2 billion Eurobond maturing next month.²²
- Even though members of the new government convened with the representatives of the IMF, they did not manage to formulate a plan whatsoever.
- Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh reassured that depositors' money would not be affected and that the exchange rate of the Lebanese pound will not exceed 1500 to the dollar.²³
- According to Capital Economics, a leading economic research consultancy based in London, Lebanon debt plan may need 70% haircut and 50% local currency drop.²⁴
- Former Lebanese economy and trade minister recommended a second Paris summit to be held, to bail out Lebanon with financial support of up to \$25 billion.²⁵
- Bank Audi, one of the nation's most prominent banks, called on the government to impose a law to govern capital controls.²⁶
- Lebanon, on the 27th of Feb, began its offshore drilling for possible oil and gas resources. Politicians associated with new government claimed that if oil and gas are discovered, the economy will automatically benefit.²⁷
- 1507.5 LBP/ USD Lebanon official currency exchange rate.²⁸

Palestine

- The UN listed 112 businesses linked to Israeli settlements. Palestinians saw it as a victory for international law.²⁹
- According to the Palestinian Authority, the Israeli authorities have blocked Palestinian agricultural exports from going abroad via Jordan.³⁰

²² Arab News, Feb 13, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1627371/business-economy>

²³ Al Monitor, Feb 13, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/02/lebanon-crisis-financial-imf-restructuring-debt-reform-help.html>

²⁴ Reuters, Feb 13, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/lebanon-crisis-debtwriteoff/lebanon-debt-plan-may-need-70-haircut-50-currency-drop-capital-economics-estimates-idUSL8N2AD5V8>

²⁵ Arab News, Feb 4, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1622966/business-economy>

²⁶ The 961, Feb 11, 2020, <https://www.the961.com/news/bank-audi-is-calling-for-strict-measures-to-revive-lebanons-economy>

²⁷ The National, Feb. 25, 2020, <https://www.thenational.ae/business/energy/lebanon-to-begin-offshore-oil-and-gas-exploration-on-thursday-1.985093>

²⁸ <http://www.bdl.gov.lb/>

²⁹ BBC, Feb 12, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51477231>

³⁰ Middle East Eye, Feb 8, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-blocks-palestinian-agricultural-exports>



- According to Palestinian Minister of Economy Khalid Al-Esseily, his ministry is currently moving to automate its services entirely and become the first e-ministry in the country.³¹
- President Mahmoud Abbas openly denounced the “deal of the century” at the United Nations further describing it as illegitimate and one-sided.³²

Syria

- The Central Bank of Syria has expanded the use of a devalued exchange rate as it seeks to lower pressure on the pound in the black market.³³
- The Syrian government has adopted several decisions to ease import trade finance, put a lid on inflation and reduce pressure on the Syrian currency.³⁴
- Despite reports that Conviasa, also known as Venezuelan Airlines, will start flying to Damascus next month, the Syrian government is still struggling to draw international airlines back to the country.
- The government has started distributing three important food items through its smart card system at subsidized prices.
- The Syrian Investment Agency has reported a slight increase in the number of projects it licensed last year but cancelled the licenses of a much larger number over the same period.³⁵
- The European Union sanctioned on February 17 several Syrian companies and individuals, including business figures from before the uprising or who emerged during the conflict and are active in sectors such as real estate and oil trading.³⁶
- The UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen urged ambassadors in the Security Council on Wednesday 19 Feb, to “put their weight” into finding a solution to end nearly nine years of conflict. With progress stalled on both the peace and political fronts in Syria.³⁷
- Current Exchange Rate in Black Market: 1000 - 1030 SP/US

³¹ Xinhua Net, Jan 22, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-01/22/c_138724705.htm

³² New York Times, Feb 11, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/11/world/middleeast/palestinian-trump-plan-UN.html>

³³ The Syria report, 12 Feb

³⁴ The Syria report, 12 Feb

³⁵ <https://www.syria-report.com>

³⁶ The Syria report, 19 Feb

³⁷ UN news, 19 Feb



Cyprus

- According to a European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) survey, Cyprus has become worse off than 2010 in terms of actual employee compensation.³⁸
- Transport Minister Yainnis Karousos declared that a 1 billion dollar agreement has been reached with Israel over redevelopment of Larnaca port and marina.³⁹
- Due to concerns from the EU that Cyprus's golden-passport scheme is vulnerable to money laundering, a process to revoke citizenship from 26 individuals may be initiated.⁴⁰
- According to the European Commission's Winter Economic Forecast, Cyprus' economy will grow by 2.8% GDP in 2020 down from 3.2% last year.⁴¹
- 1.08 USD Euro official currency value⁴²

3. THE REFUGEE SITUATION (Updated)

Egypt

- Egyptian Ambassador Nada Draz, and Deputy Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs for Migration, Refugees and Combating Human Trafficking, Amrel-Sherbiny convened with Nina Gregori, the executive director of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) in Malta, to discuss the current situation of the refugee crisis in Egypt and the world, with the increasing waves of displacement in the world due to political and economic conflicts. Gregori praised Egypt's policies and actions in the domain of hosting refugees from African and the Middle East.⁴³

³⁸ Financial Mirror, Feb 3, 2020, <https://www.financialmirror.com/2020/02/03/cypriots-earning-less-than-10-years-ago/>

³⁹ In Cyprus, Feb 13, 2020, <https://in-cyprus.com/larnaca-agreement-reached-with-israeli-consortium-for-port-marina-project/>

⁴⁰ Reuters, Feb 12, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cyprus-citizenship-watchdog/cyprus-golden-passports-scheme-a-laundering-risk-says-watchdog-idUSKBN2052T2>

⁴¹ Financial Mirror, Feb 13, 2020, <https://www.financialmirror.com/2020/02/13/cyprus-gdp-growth-will-slow-to-2-8-in-2020/>

⁴² https://www.ecb.europa.eu/stats/policy_and_exchange_rates/euro_reference_exchange_rates/html/eurofxref-graph-usd.en.html

⁴³ Egypt Today, Feb 9, 2020, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/2/81434/EASO%E2%80%99s-executive-director-meets-Egypt%E2%80%99s-amb-in-Malta>



- UNICEF representative in Egypt Bruno Maesin met Egypt's Social Solidarity Minister Niveen el Qabbag to discuss 2020/2021 joint action plan between the ministry and the organization. The necessity to bolster cooperation with the UNICEF to promote the services of child protection, was emphasized.⁴⁴

Jordan

The UNHCR states that there are currently 655,435 registered refugees in Jordan up until the beginning of February.

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

- 193,399 in Amman Governorate (29.5 %)
 - 162,317 in Mafraq Governorate (24.8%)
 - 134,651 in Irbid Governorate (20.6%)
 - 94,809 in Zarqa Governorate (14.5%)
 - 18,529 in Balqa Governorate (2.8%)
 - 13,038 in Madaba Governorate (2%)
 - 9,295 in Jarash Governorate (1.4%)
 - 8,510 in Karak Governorate (1.3%)
 - 8,269 in Maan Governorate (1.3%)
 - 6,544 in Ajlun Governorate (1.0%)
 - 3,598 in Aqaba Governorate (0.5%)
 - 1,715 in Tafilah Governorate (0.3%)
- In a study published in February by the UNHCR, the number of work permits allocated for Syrian refugees has reached 170,938 up until January 2020. ⁴⁵
 - Three innovative educational programs in Jordan, worth more than 7 million USD and aimed to empower Syrian refugees and Jordanian children, along with educators and government representatives, were launched by Dubai Cares.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ahram, Feb 16, 2020, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/363576/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt,-UNICEF-probe-joint-action-plan.aspx>

⁴⁵ Relief Web, Feb 11, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/73936.pdf>

⁴⁶ Emirates News Agency, Feb 17, 2020, <http://wam.ae/en/details/1395302824512>



Iraq

The UNHCR states that there are currently 247,568 registered Syrian refugees in Iraq.

The proportion of displaced Syrian people registered within the UNHCR up until the beginning of February, are distributed as follows:

- 124,795 in Erbil (50.4%)
 - 88,841 in Dahuk (35.9%)
 - 31,027 in Sulaymaniyah (12.5%)
 - 1,140 in Anbar (0.5%)
 - 1,765 in other areas (0.8%)⁴⁷
- The UNHCR has published in February, a report claiming that as of January 2020, 4% of 2020's annual budget (510.5 million USD) has been funded.⁴⁸
 - ACT alliance has launched an appeal worth 3,720,892 USD for multi-Sectoral Support to IDPs, Refugees, Returnees and Host Communities Affected by the Conflict in Iraq.⁴⁹
 - When the Iraqi government announced a plan to resettle 30,000 refugees from al-Hol in Ninewa, local officials and Ninewa residents opposed the move, fearing that many of al-Hol inhabitants are not Iraqis and may be from families affiliated with ISIS fighters.⁵⁰

Lebanon

Since the beginning of February, the number of registered refugees in Lebanon is 910,256.

Refugees in Lebanon are distributed as follows:

- 344,013 in Bekaa (37.8%)
- 241,102 in North Lebanon (26.5%)
- 222,944 in Beirut (24.5%)
- 102,197 in South Lebanon (11.2%)⁵¹

⁴⁷ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/5>

⁴⁸ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/202001%20UNHCR%20Iraq%20Factsheet%20January%202020.pdf>

⁴⁹ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Appeal_-Iraq_Conflict-IRQ201.pdf

⁵⁰ Relief Web, Feb 13, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/ishm-february-6-february-13-2020>

⁵¹ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71>



- In February, the LCRP 2019 End Year Funding Update (Inter-Agency Coordination Lebanon) was published showing that 55% of requested funds are not available (1.43 billion of 2.62 billion USD).⁵²
- Several Syrian refugees, including children, patients and elderly have died during the winter storms as many camps are not equipped with heating means and adequate infrastructure.⁵³
- In light of the announcement of the “Deal of the Century” and the outrage of the Palestinians, several politicians in Lebanon categorically rejected the notion of naturalizing Palestinian refugees.
- The Lebanese government approved a new policy statement claiming that all displaced persons must leave the country.⁵⁴

Syria

IDP movements

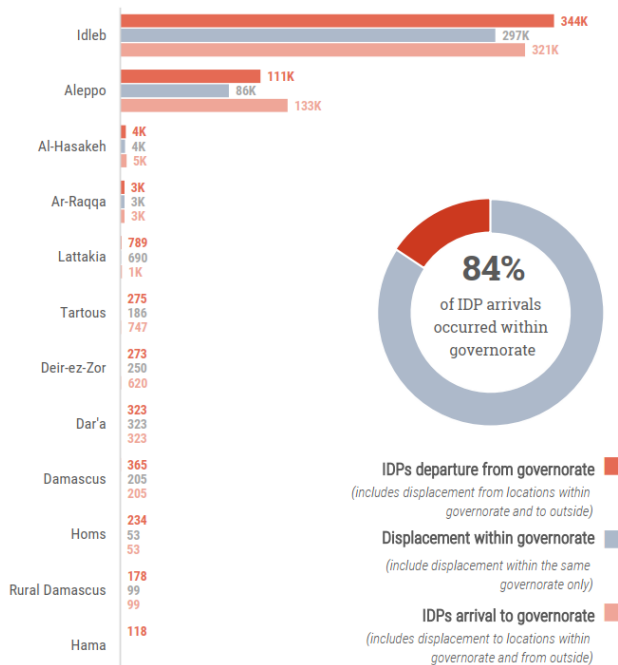
In January 2020, the humanitarian community tracked about 464,800 IDPs movements across Syria.

The largest population movement recorded in Idleb governorate with about 320,600 IDPs, including 297,000 IDPs displaced from within Idleb governorate and 23,500 IDPs displaced from Aleppo governorate.

The second-largest population movement was recorded in Aleppo governorate with around 132,600 IDPs, including 86,100 people arriving from within Aleppo governorate and 46,400 IDPs from Idleb governorate.

The third-largest movement in the first month of the year is recorded in Al-Hasakeh governorate with around 4,900 IDPs of which 3,700 displaced within the governorate while

Governorate summary



⁵² <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/74000>

⁵³ Anadolu Agency, Feb 12, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/life/winter-adds-to-suffering-of-syrian-refugees-in-lebanon/1732290>

⁵⁴ Middle East Monitor, Feb 6, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200206-lebanon-president-to-force-displaced-persons-to-return-home/>



the rest moved from Aleppo governorate. In Ar-Raqqa governorate around 3,400 IDPs movements reported. Lattakia governorate received around 1,300 IDPs from several governorates in Syria including Aleppo, Homs, Tartous and Hama governorates. In Rural Damascus governorate, about 100 IDP movements reported⁵⁵.

Mohafaza	2019 Total	2020 Jan	Total from 2016 till Jan 2020
Idleb	1095958	320582	3270920
Aleppo	437874	132560	2529183
Al-Hasakeh	136773	4932	530635
Ar-Raqqa	58101	3446	640432
Lattakia	16703	1263	68561
Tartous	9754	747	50326
Deir-ez-Zor	51558	620	374662
Dar'a		323	483027
Damascus	2409	205	81725
Rural Damascus	2602	99	384182
Homs	13385	53	106378
As-Sweida	362		29665
Hama	2412		268754
Quneitra	39		53859
Grand Total	1827930	464830	8872309

Returnees			
Mohafaza	2019 Total	2020 Jan	Total from 2016 till Jan 2020
Aleppo	64455	5745	717719
Al-Hasakeh	54530	4770	88296
Idleb	79919	2977	253798
Homs	43960	2164	90793
Ar-Raqqa	11824	1962	236728
Deir-ez-Zor	78905	1605	254670
Dar'a	89552	1006	550808

⁵⁵OCHA, IDP and IDP Spontaneous Return Movements (January updates)



Rural Damascus	35550	691	230304
Hama	24870	259	193905
Damascus	342	210	20345
As-Sweida	1645		4304
Lattakia			737
Quneitra	8583		51999
Grand Total	494135	21389	2694406⁵⁶

IDP Spontaneous Return Movements (January updates)

In January 2020, the humanitarian community recorded about 21,400 spontaneous IDP returnees in different locations across Syria.

The majority of these returns were recorded within Aleppo governorate with 5,600 returns. The second largest return movement were to Al-Hasakeh governorate with around 4,800 returnees, about 4,600 of which returned from within the governorate and about 100 returnees from As-Sweida governorate. In Idleb governorate some 3,000 IDP returned, 2,890 of which returned from within governorate, with some 40 returnees from Hama governorate. In Homs and Ar-Raqqa governorates similarly, around 2,000 spontaneous IDP returned.⁵⁷

Northwest Syria

- The humanitarian crisis for people in northwest Syria continues to reach new and dire levels. Some 900,000 people have been displaced since 1 December,⁵⁸ including an estimated 500,000 children. Freezing weather and a lack of adequate shelter have killed seven children, including one 7-month old child. From February 1 to the 16th, at least 35 children have been killed by airstrikes and ground based attacks in North Western Syria.⁵⁹
- Indiscriminate attacks in civilian areas continue to drive people from their homes and destroy vital services, including hospitals, markets, and schools. Cold weather has made the situation worse.

⁵⁶ <https://data.humdata.org/dataset/syrian-arab-republic-idp-movements-and-idp-spontaneous-return-movements-data>

⁵⁷ Relief Web, Feb 25, 2020, [https://reliefweb.int/map/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-idp-movements-january-2020#:~:text=IDP%20Spontaneous%20Return%20Movements%20\(January,Aleppo%20governorate%20with%205%20C600%20returns.](https://reliefweb.int/map/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-idp-movements-january-2020#:~:text=IDP%20Spontaneous%20Return%20Movements%20(January,Aleppo%20governorate%20with%205%20C600%20returns.)

⁵⁸ OCHA, Flash Update No. 8, 20 Feb

⁵⁹ Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations, 20 Feb



- The frontlines in northwest Syria are rapidly moving closer to densely populated areas, with bombardments increasingly affecting IDP sites and their vicinity.⁶⁰
- Some 1,040 people reportedly moved from the Idleb area to areas under the control of the Government of Syria since 1 December. Humanitarian actors are increasing their readiness for potential further movement of people. Some 1,000 people recently displaced from northwest Syria, reportedly arrived in Ar-Raqqa city where they are receiving assistance at collective shelters.
- Some 330,000 of the almost 900,000 people who displaced since 1 December fled to areas in northern Aleppo governorate such as Afrin, A'zaz and Al Bab.
- An estimated 1.9 million people were estimated to be in need of humanitarian assistance in the Idleb area.⁶¹

Northeast Syria

- The Turkish backed forces who seize Alouk's water station, which is the main source of drinking water in Hasaka, cut off drinking water from Hasaka and Tal-Tamer city and its surrounding residential neighborhoods.⁶²
- With the continued drastic drops in temperatures, women and girls are adversely affected by the cold weather as there are dire needs for NFIs that will protect them from the weather.
- In recent weeks, three new informal IDP settlements have been established: Tweineh (hosting an estimated 4,120 people), Tal-Samen (estimated 20 people) and Daham (estimated 1,800 people)
- Humanitarian actors have diverted programs and resources to respond to protection needs of newly displaced populations in Tal Tamer, Al-Hassakeh, Areesha camp, Mahmoudli camp, Ar-Raqqa city and surrounding areas.⁶³

HUMANITARIAN ACCESS FROM ALL LOCATIONS (FROM WITHIN SYRIA AND CROSS-BORDER)

While access constraints remain throughout the country, UN agencies, INGOs and Syrian NGOs operating from within Syria reported comparatively higher quality of access in most parts of government - controlled governorates, including Damascus, Rural Damascus, Homs, Hama, Lattakia,

⁶⁰ OCHA, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria

⁶¹ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/flash_update_nws_20200220.pdf

⁶² SANA, 24 Feb

⁶³ UNFPA, 04 Jan 2020



Tartous and Aleppo. More than 70 percent of mission requests were approved in August and September. Several communities and enclaves remain difficult to access, including Rukban; Duma, Zamalka, Arbin, East Harasta, Kafr Batna, Modira and Nashabieh in Eastern Ghouta; Bait Jan and Mazraet Beit Jin; Zakeyh and Deir Khabiyeh and Daraya – owing to administrative and security approvals.

In the northeast, the humanitarian access situation was made more complex by the recent Turkish military offensive. Following Operation Peace Spring, areas under control of Turkish Armed Forces and Non-State Armed groups remain difficult to access, with a limited number of cross-line missions thus far authorized.

Furthermore, the proximity of the M4 highway to frontlines led to significant disruption for the transportation of humanitarian supplies and staff movement, although a reported agreement on 1 December saw the resumption of commercial traffic. While most of the Raqqa and Hasakeh governorates are regularly accessed by Quamishli-based UN and partners, access to Shadadah and Markadah sub-districts remains difficult due to security concerns owing to the presence of IEDs, general criminality and ISIL infiltration, continue to hamper sustained access and presence. Extensive explosive hazard contamination continues to present a barrier to scaling up assistance and basic service provision in Raqqa city.⁶⁴

Despite recent shifts in control, access remains permissible in the large majority of areas, with continued operations across Raqqa and Hasakeh governorates, including Menbij and Ain Al Arab to respond to humanitarian needs. However, while access is reported as moderate across a large number of areas, there is comparatively better access in Hasekeh given additional presence of humanitarian actors, significant number of offices and increased predictability in security following recent agreements between parties. Menbij and Ain Al Arab are currently characterized by more limited international staff presence. Access has become extremely challenging in areas between Tell Abiad and Ras al-Ain following recent military operations. Some Turkish and Syrian NGOs have access to this area from Turkey, but humanitarian activities are limited due to ongoing insecurity.

Access remains limited in South Eastern Deir-ez-Zor due to on-going insecurity and far distances to existing NGO bases (although there are plans for additional presence in North Eastern and Western Deir-Ez-Zor to address this).⁶⁵

In the southern governorates

There is limited UN and INGO permanent presence, limiting the scope and sustainability of humanitarian activities. Field missions are authorized in specific areas and a number of Syria Humanitarian Fund projects

⁶⁴ [OCHA, Humanitarian access analysis](#)

⁶⁵ [Relief web, OCHA](#)



are implemented by humanitarian partners. Access remains challenging in areas under local agreement due to insecurity and administrative regulations.

In northwest Syria

In the period October-December, humanitarian access was generally permissive across the northwest for cross-border humanitarian actors, with the notable exception of frontline or conflict affected areas where violence inhibits systematic access. Insecurity makes operating in these frontline areas highly dangerous and unpredictable. As new areas are impacted with violence, humanitarian staff often becomes displaced; humanitarian infrastructure used to deliver basic services in the areas affect by this violence is then damaged or destroyed. In some instances, partners suspend operations to keep staff and affected people safe. In the frontlines of the violence, the degradation of humanitarian infrastructure is a significant barrier for both humanitarian actors to reach people and for people to access basic services.

To reach all those people in need with the full spectrum of humanitarian services, additional humanitarian capacity is needed. Throughout most of the northwest, cross-border partners have systematic, routine access to the people in need, and the population has regular access to humanitarian services. Humanitarian access improved in 2019 in some areas, such as northern Aleppo and northwest Idlib. In northern Aleppo countryside (Afrin, Azaz, Al-Bab and Jarablus districts) administrative restrictions affected some humanitarian partners ability to operate in the area. In the Dana area, ongoing skirmishes and violence was reported throughout the period, with IED incidents, reports of arrests, assaults, and kidnappings. Additionally, access to health facilities was reduced due to significant increase in the IDP population^{66, 67}

Cyprus

- Cypriot Interior Minister Nicos Nouris claimed that measures are being taken to cut down on asylum and residence permit applications such as blocking economic migrants from filing non-legitimate petitions.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ OCHA, Humanitarian access analysis

⁶⁷ Humanitarian Response, Feb 1, 2020, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/whole-of-syria/infographic/regional-funding-update-syria-crisis-reported-1-feb-2020-enar>

⁶⁸ Ekathimerini, Feb 17, 2020, <http://www.ekathimerini.com/249633/article/ekathimerini/news/cyprus-gets-tough-on-economic-migrants>



- An event titled “Bridging occupational gaps with refugees and asylum seeker” was held by The European University Cyprus and the Occupational Therapy Program of the School of Sciences on the 22nd of February, in an attempt to connect displaced people with the local community.⁶⁹
- The European Project E-DESIGN and the NGO Citizens In Power started during February, offering Free ICT training courses for unemployed, migrants and refugees.⁷⁰
- Refugees living in a total of 43 apartment blocks, have been told to leave their houses after they have been deemed as being beyond repair. Moreover, refugees have not been informed by the government if it will allocate other housing.⁷¹
- Interior Minister Nicos Nouris, during his reception of a delegation of the Refugee Association (PEP) at the Presidential Palace, claimed that there is a need for a national refugee strategy to tackle issues faced by refugees. Such a plan, he added should be formulated by June 2020.⁷²

4. CHURCH ACTIVITIES

Egypt

- On the 11th of February, the Egyptian government legalized 82 churches, adding the total number of churches legalized to 1494.⁷³
- His Holiness Pope Tawadros II of Alexandria and Patriarch of the Holy See of St. Mark, participated in the annual seminar of the Congregation of Maadi Parish Priests and their dependencies, which was held over two days. The event bore the theme “Fatherhood” and was attended by 53 priests and deakonians.⁷⁴
- His Holiness Pope Tawadros II received at the Pontifical Residence in Cairo, Dr. Cyril Jan Non, the newly appointed German Ambassador in Cairo. The latter declared that he is ready to work diligently, with the Coptic church.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Cyprus Mail, Feb 11, 2020, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/02/11/bridging-occupational-gaps-with-refugees-and-asylum-seekers/>

⁷⁰ In Cyprus, Feb 14, 2020, <https://in-cyprus.com/free-ict-training-courses-for-unemployed-migrants-and-refugees/>

⁷¹ In Cyprus, Feb 11, 2020, <https://in-cyprus.com/larnaca-refugees-told-to-move-after-building-ruled-unsuitable/>

⁷² Cyprus Mail, Feb 10, 2020, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/02/10/urgent-need-for-national-refugee-strategy-says-minister/>

⁷³ Sputnik News, Feb 11, 2020, https://arabic.sputniknews.com/arab_world/202002121044517652

⁷⁴ El Balad, Feb 5, 2020, <https://www.elbalad.news/4162109>

⁷⁵ El balad, Jan 28, 2020, <https://www.elbalad.news/4151313>



Jordan

- The head of the Department of Foreign Relations of the Russian Church, Metropolitan Hilarion, announced that the Patriarch of Moscow and the rest of Russia, Kirill, will attend a meeting of the heads of the Orthodox Churches in the Jordanian capital, Amman.⁷⁶
- The Jordanian Evangelical Synod of Churches extended its highest congratulations and blessings to His Majesty King Abdullah II, on the occasion of the 58th birthday of His Majesty, and thanked him for his efforts to establish a just, comprehensive and lasting peace in the region, including his stance on the “Deal of the century”.⁷⁷
- The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land held a ceremony in honor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in recognition of its donation to the construction of the Evangelical Lutheran Bath Church - Bayt Abra Jordan.⁷⁸
- The Latin Church in Amman congratulated the pastor Hossam Elias Naoum on the occasion of his election as Bishop of the Anglican Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East, which is officially called the Arab Episcopal Church, and includes Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria.⁷⁹
- His Majesty King Abdullah II convened with His Holiness the head of the Armenian Orthodox Church and Cathilocos of All Armenians, Karikin II, in the Armenian cathedral of the Mother - Echmedyadzin in the capital, Yerevan. His Majesty stressed the importance of the role of the Armenians and Christians in Jordan, and that they are an integral part of the social fabric in the region, and of the future of the Middle East. His Majesty also pointed out the importance of the Christian presence in Jerusalem, stressing that Jerusalem is a city of peace, unified and not divided.⁸⁰

Iraq

- His Holiness Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako, Patriarch of Babylon of the Chaldeans and head of the Chaldean Catholic Church, received a letter from HH Pope Francis. In the letter, the Pope prayed for Iraq, so that it may live in peace and stand bravely in front of everything that would undermine or destroy this peace. He also hoped for a partnership between all its residents, whatever their group or religion they belong to.⁸¹
- Pope Francis received Catholics of the Near East in the Vatican. They included: Patriarch of Babylon of the Chaldeans Cardinal Louis Raphael I Sako, Patriarch of Antioch for Maronites Cardinal Bechara

⁷⁶ Russia Today, Feb. 12, 2020, https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/1085151

⁷⁷ Amman net, Jan 30, 2020, <https://ammannet.net/>

⁷⁸ Ammon News, Jan 28, 2020, <https://www.ammonnews.net/article/514246>

⁷⁹ Albawab News, Feb 2, 2020, <https://www.albawabnews.com/3889382>

⁸⁰ Alghad, Feb 10, 2020, <https://alghad.com/>

⁸¹ Akhbar Elyom, Feb 5, 2020, <https://akhbarelyom.com/news/newdetails/2993983/1/>



Boutros Al-Rahi, Patriarch of Alexandria for the Catholic Copts, Monsignor Ibrahim Isaac Cedrak, patriarch of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church Monsignor Youssef Absi, Patriarch of Cilicia of the Armenians, Monsignor Krikor Bedros the 20th Gebruian, and Syriac Patriarch of Antioch Monsignor Ignatius Joseph III Yunnan. Pope Francis's reception of the patriarchs came at their request, to share their questions and concerns about the mass exodus of Christians from areas affected by conflict and violence, especially Iraq and Syria.⁸²

- The Chaldean Patriarchate in Iraq the world, affirmed that the Palestinian cause is an issue of sacred right, and there is no solution without resorting to diplomacy, through direct negotiations between the two sides, for the establishment of two neighboring countries living in peace, security and stability.⁸³

Lebanon

- The Primate of the Orthodox Church of Antioch, HB Patriarch John X of Antioch and All the East, during his message for the time of fasting, prayed for the peace of the whole world, the end of war, and the welfare of the 'wounded' Middle East.⁸⁴
- HB Maronite Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, Cardinal Mar Bechara Boutros Al-Rahi, during his visit to Rome, prayed for the sake of Lebanon, and called on Lebanese politicians to stop their shameful bickering and start working together.⁸⁵
- HB Patriarch Youssef el Absi, The Patriarch of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, during his visit to France, convened with Ambassador Emmanuel Boone, advisor for Middle East affairs to French President Emmanuel Macron, and discussed with him the cooperation between France and Lebanon and the support to the Christians, especially in the field of education.⁸⁶

Palestine

- HE Atallah Hanna, Archbishop of Sebastian Greek Orthodox, once again labeled the "Deal of the Century" of U.S. President D. Trump, as a conspiracy and an attempt to eliminate all Palestinian rights. He also claimed that "Jerusalem is not for sale; the conspiracy will fail like all previous attempts to eliminate the basic Palestinian rights."⁸⁷

⁸² Albawabh News, Feb 10, 2020, <https://www.albawabhnews.com/3899101>

⁸³ Iraq Akhbar, Feb. 10, 2020, <https://iraqakhbar.com/2230468>

⁸⁴ Al-Bina, Feb 24, 2020, <https://www.al-binaa.com/archives/236695>

⁸⁵ Annahar, Feb 15, 2020, <https://www.annahar.com/article/1124566>

⁸⁶ Annahar, Feb 4, 2020, <https://www.annahar.com/article/1118276>

⁸⁷ International Middle East, Media Center, Feb 11, 2020, <https://imemc.org/article/archbishop-hanna-jerusalem-is-not-for-sale/>



- The Vatican condemned Trump's deal, claiming that it does not take into consideration "the just demands of the Palestinian people for their homeland, their rights and dignified life."⁸⁸
- HE Atallah Hanna commended His Excellency King Mohammed VI, King of Morocco, for his support of the Palestinian cause and Palestinian rights.⁸⁹

Syria

- HB Patriarch John X, The Primate of the Orthodox Church of Antioch, presided over a mass for the fallen at St. George's Church – Damascus. He claimed a person's life does not end with the dissolution of his earthly body and the departure of his soul; a person continues alive in spirit, awaiting the resurrection.⁹⁰
- During February HH Patriarch Mar Ignatius Aphrem II, Patriarch of Antioch and all the East of the Syriac Orthodox, celebrated the Holy Qurobo at St. Georges Patriarchal Cathedral in Bab Touma, Damascus and at St. Antonios Maronite Cathedral in Damascus. Also, he presided over ramsho (evening) prayer at Mor Ignatius Cathedral in Dubai. Moreover, he convened with His Excellency Mr. Jorgen Lindstrom, Charge d'Affaires of the Swedish Embassy in Damascus, His Excellency Hans-Peter Glanzer, Charge d'Affaires of the Austrian Embassy, and His Excellency Sheikh Nahyan Bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, UAE Minister of Tolerance.⁹¹
- Mgr Mario Zenari, apostolic nuncio to Damascus, during an interview with Asian News, claimed that the situation in Syria is still critical. Moreover, the recent armed escalations surrounding Idlib have generated an additional 700,000 displaced persons, adding to the 2 million people already displaced.⁹²

Cyprus

- 17,500 residents of Famagusta called on the bi-communal technical committee for cultural heritage to preserve a church called Ayia Paraskevi and in built during the 16th century in northern Varosha.⁹³

⁸⁸ The Trumpet, Feb 7, 2020, <https://www.thetrumpet.com/21909-catholic-bishops-condemn-trumps-peace-plan>

⁸⁹ Morocco World News, Feb, 7, 2020, <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2020/02/293142/jerusalem-archbishop-thanks-king-mohammed-vi-for-efforts-to-defend-palestine/>

⁹⁰ Albawab News, <https://www.albawabhnews.com/3912112>

⁹¹ <https://syriacpatriarchate.org/>

⁹² Asia News, Feb 12, 2020, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Card-Zenari:-risk-of-a-humanitarian-catastrophe-in-Syria-with-the-Church-as-a-field-hospital-49278.html>

⁹³ Cyprus Mail, January 28, 2020, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/01/28/residents-call-for-action-on-famagusta-church/>



- His Eminence Archbishop Makarios – Primate of the Greek Orthodox Church of Australia, attended the Cypriot Diaspora Youth Conference held in Canberra, Australia to celebrate Cypriot culture.⁹⁴

5. MECC HEADQUARTERS ACTIVITIES

Trauma Healing and Spiritual Counseling in Syria (Jan 27- Feb 1)



Trauma Healing and Spiritual Counseling held in Syria, Jan 27- Feb 1, 2020, Photo Credit: MECC website.

The MECC Theological and Ecumenical Department (TED) held the first session of its program “Trauma Healing and Spiritual Counseling”, dedicated for ministers and pastors from different parishes in the village of Al-Mishtaya in Wadi Al-Nasara - Syria from January 27 till February 1, 2020.

⁹⁴ Greek City Times, Feb 12, 2020, <https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/02/12/cypriot-diaspora-youth-conference-held-in-canberra-australia/>



The session took place for 5 days and was entitled “He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while” (Mark 6:31)”. The participants were 24 in total including priests, nuns and individuals from many Syrian regions such as Qamishli, Aleppo, Deir Al-Zour, Homs, Damascus. They work in different ecclesial organizations that offer medical, pastoral and social services. The beneficiaries came from parishes that include elderly members, children and poor families that live in difficult social conditions, and have faced persecution, displacement and several types of violence. Also, some of the participants had suffered severe trauma as a result of kidnap or murder attempts that they or their relatives were exposed to.

During a daily program, the participants were accompanied by a team of priests, trainers and psychotherapists. They participated in various activities, starting with morning prayers, followed by educational sessions on psychological topics such as the concept of death, resilience, and ways to adapt and deal with spiritual, physical, and psychological trauma. In addition, several spiritual topics related to the conditions lived by the participants and the repercussions of crises and traumas, were discussed. The afternoon period was dedicated to sport exercises and sessions on personal and life skills. Moreover, each participant benefited from an individual accompaniment with a psychotherapist and a spiritual counselor. During this program, the group also undertook a pilgrimage trip to the St. George’s Archaeological Patriarchal Monastery in Al-Homeyra and a cultural visit to the fort of Al-Hosn in the Marmarita region.

The participants also got to present their talents and the cultural traditions of their Churches and communities; this is what made them closer and allowed them to discover each other’s backgrounds. In conclusion, it is worth noting that the participants have evaluated the program at the end of the session.



ATIME Meeting of Theology Students (Feb 1)



Meeting of Theology Students from Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, Feb 1, 2020, photo credit: MECC website.

The ATIME Student Committee, composed of students from different theological institutes in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq held its first regular meeting on the 1st of February 2020. The meeting was hosted by the Pontifical Faculty of Theology at the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK) – Kaslik, Lebanon. His Eminence Archbishop Yacoub Babawi, dean of the Mor Aphrem Theological Seminary at Ma'arat Saydnaya, attended the meeting and gave his blessing.

The meeting was presided over by Father Edgard El Haiby, ATIME Executive Secretary and Director of the Higher Institute of Religious Studies at the Saint Joseph University (USJ) – Beirut. The Rev. Dr Bassam Nassif from St John of Damascus Institute of Theology at Balamand, who is ATIME's Associate Executive Secretary, was also present.

Students representing their faculties were among the participants. They included: Rabih Dib Wehbe and Katia Toufic Wehbe from the Faculty of Religious Sciences at USJ – Beirut, Giscard Boulos and Sister Stephanie Saliba from the Pontifical Faculty of Theology – Kaslik, Karla Karam and Kheir Abou Kheir from the Faculty of Religious and Theological Sciences – Sagesse University, Khalil Haddad from the Near East School of Theology, Ayad Zainieh and Raymond El Amir from Saint-Paul Institute for Philosophy and Theology – St. Paul Institute, Ibrahim Kalimeh and Elias Chahine from St John of Damascus Institute of Theology – Balamand and finally, Eddy Joseph Maher and Wassim El Nessr from Mor Aphrem Theological Seminary - Ma'arat Saydnaya.



The meeting started with ATIME Executive Secretary's welcome speech in which he stressed the importance of ecumenical dialogue and the passion driving Christians in the Middle East to get to know the other. Based on the quote "How can I understand unless someone explains it to me?" from the Bible story of Philip and the Ethiopian, Father El Haiby considered that the Middle East is in urgent need of a witness of love and solidarity. He elaborated by saying: "How can the other understand our faith if he does not encounter someone bearing witness to our love and unity?". Therefore, ecumenical witness is considered to be one of the core responsibilities of the Churches, one that should also be fulfilled by theological institutes and their students.

His Eminence Archbishop Babawi also gave a speech in which he encouraged students to consolidate ecumenical work in their institutes and faculties. He focused on the importance of effective work that goes beyond wishes, speeches and words.

After the roundtable of introductions, the attendees examined the main articles of the bylaws, especially those related to the objectives of the student committee and its work methods. They also discussed several suggestions of activities suitable to achieve the goals of the committee based on a specific annual calendar. Finally, after setting a date for the next meeting that should take place within a month, the student committee meeting was concluded.

MECC at the Armenian Church Catholicosate of Cilicia's Ecumenical Consultation (Feb. 6)



The Armenian Church Catholicosate of Cilicia's Ecumenical Consultation, Feb 6, 2020, Photo Credit: MECC website.



Representing MECC, Dr Souraya Bechealany, participated in the Ecumenical Consultation entitled “Towards a more responsive and inclusive ecumenical vision” organized by the Armenian Church Catholicosate of Cilicia from the 31st of January till the 2nd of February 2020 at its headquarters in Antelias, Lebanon.

The international ecumenical event, which was presided over by His Holiness Catholicos Aram I Kechichian, gathered theologians and experts in the ecumenical movement and ecclesial relations, from South Korea, Burundi, Indonesia, India, Jordan, Ghana, Russia, Switzerland, the Vatican, Sweden, Finland, Canada, the United States of America and Lebanon.

During a session focusing on the issues and challenges facing the ecumenical movement, Dr Souraya Bechealany highlighted the repercussions of the growing tension between the Church as an Institution and the Church that refers to the People of God, on the Middle East Council of Churches.

“We are invited to forget ourselves and rather focus on the Kingdom of God and on what the Holy Spirit inspires the Churches to do, these Churches living with Muslims, Jews and non-believers in the M.E”, emphasized Dr Bechealany Amid the diversity that could be a source of tensions, Bechealany concluded that Christians consider this diversity and especially their coexistence with Muslims as “a sign of hope” pushing them to accomplish their mission which is to be the “salt of the earth and light of the world”.

Trauma Healing and Spiritual Counseling (Feb 2- 8)



Trauma Healing and Spiritual Counseling in Egypt, Feb 2-8, 2020, Photo Credit: MECC website.



“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while...” (Mark 6:31) was the title of the first session within the Trauma Healing and Spiritual Counseling program organized by the Middle East Council of Churches’ Theological and Ecumenical Department (TED) at the Anaphora Center in Egypt.

The session that was held between Sunday, February 2 and Saturday, February 8, 2020, gathered ministers, priests and nuns from different churches in Egypt, who work in the apostolic field. They mainly take care of and accompany suffering people who have endured life’s hardships or been subject to terrorist acts resulting in traumatic psychological trauma. The participants came from Damanhour, Marsa Matruh, Al Ismailia, Al Menyah, Shubra and all the neighborhoods of Cairo.

The program addressed physical, psychological and spiritual levels through diverse activities. These activities included morning sessions focusing on the definition of trauma and its repercussions on individuals and communities, life skills training sessions given by a specialized instructor, and one-on-one sessions with two psychotherapists and spiritual counselors that have contributed to the organization of the program. During the evening, a festive ambiance prevailed as participants got to demonstrate their hidden talents.

In the preliminary general evaluation, the participants highlighted the importance and incomparable value of those sessions. This has demonstrated an urgent need for further trauma healing initiatives and processes in the Middle Eastern countries torn by wars and tragedies, in order to alleviate the spiritual and psychological pain of victims.



German Catholic Bishops' Conference delegation visits MECC (Feb 12-14)



German Catholic Bishop's conference delegation visiting His Holiness Catholicos Aram I, Feb 12-14, 2020, photo credit: MECC website.

A delegation from the German Catholic Bishops' Conference headed by Dr. Udo Bentz, chairman of the Middle and Near East Working Group, has visited the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC). The delegation included Dr. Daniel Legutke, Secretary of the Working Group, and Mr. Nadim Amman, one of the Group's members.

Dr Souraya Bechealany, MECC Secretary General, has accompanied the delegation during its visit. They first met with His Eminence Archbishop Paul Sayyah, a member of MECC Executive Committee. They also visited His Holiness Catholicos Aram I, Patriarch of the Armenian Apostolic Church of Cilicia.

In addition, the delegation met with Fr. Pierre Najm, President of Notre-Dame University (NDU) and some of the university's students. The delegation members then got to know more about "Kairos ME: Towards Churches Global Compact", which was launched by MECC one year ago. This project was presented by Fr. Gabriel Hachem, director of the MECC Theological and Ecumenical Department, Fr. Raphael Zgheib, the project coordinator, and Mr. Ziad Sayegh, MECC Policies and Communication Advisor.



At the end of the visit, the delegation met with the MECC Strategic Group who are also members of the MECC Executive Committee: RR Dr. Habib Badr, President of the Evangelical Family in MECC, as well as Archbishop Paul Sayah, Dr. Michel Abs and Dr. Jean Salmanian.

The aim of this visit that took place between February 12th and 14th, 2020, was to examine the challenges faced by the Middle East and particularly the Middle East Council of Churches, as well as those facing the German Churches, in order to discuss future cooperation between the two parties.

KAIROS Second Consultation Seminar (Feb 21-22)



KAIROS second seminar in Bethania - Harissa, Lebanon, Feb 21-22, 2020, photo credit: MECC website.

The Theological and Ecumenical Department of the Middle East Council of Churches held the second consultation seminar of its process entitled "Kairos Middle East Towards Churches Global Compact ". The seminar took place over two days, From February 21 to 22, 2020 in Bethania - Harissa, Lebanon.

More than 30 experts in theology and geopolitics from Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Cyprus and Jordan, have participated in this consultation seminar.



The seminar aimed at discussing, from theological and geopolitical perspectives, the challenges faced by Christians and their fellow citizens in the Middle East, as well as their presence and role on the ecclesiastical level.

MECC at ACT Alliance Reference Group Meetings (Feb 24-28)

MECC Policies and Communication advisor Ziad El Sayegh participated in the ACT Alliance Reference Group meetings in Geneva (24-28 February). During the event he discussed FBO's Policy with Act Alliance SG Mr. Rudelmar De Faria



Mr. Ziad El Sayegh at the ACT Alliance Reference Group Meetings, Feb 24- 28, 2020, photo credit: MECC website



MECC Communication team visiting WCC (Feb 22-28)



MECC Communication Team and the Archive Team with WCC Secretary General Olav Tveit and WCC Communications Director Marianne Ejdersten, 22-28 Feb 2020, Photo Credit: MECC.

As an advanced step to strengthen the cooperation and deepen the coordination and communication between the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) on many levels, MECC Communication and Public Relations Department and Archives team visited WCC Communications Department at the Ecumenical Center in Switzerland - Geneva.

Within the strategic partnership with the World Council of Churches, this visit took place from 22 till 28 February 2020, at the invitation of the Communications Department's Director Marianne Ejdersten. During this training, MECC team have participated in many capacity-building sessions in the ecumenical and communication fields.

At the beginning of the journey, Rev. Dr Olav Tveit, WCC Secretary General, has warmly welcomed MECC team during a dinner meeting at Chateau de Bossey. The historical ties between the two councils and the ecumenical heritage they are both entrusted with, were discussed.



The training visit started with a tour at the WCC headquarters and its different departments in Geneva. Then, the delegation participated in a daily training program that included diversified sessions about the World Council of Churches' history, programs and activities, as well as its ecumenical and media work and relations. In addition, these sessions focused on how to set an action plan for an activity or program, on the role of the Archives team, and on developed work methods adopted in this department.

Moreover, a session was also dedicated to the Middle East Council of Churches where Huguette Salameh, MECC Communication and Public Relations Department's Director, got the chance to present the role of the department and its strategies.

It is worth noting that the visit was characterized by remarkable human communication and professional and technical exchange, which reflect both councils' themes. We walk, pray, and work together to promote the ecumenical spirit and build bridges between our Churches in the East and the West.

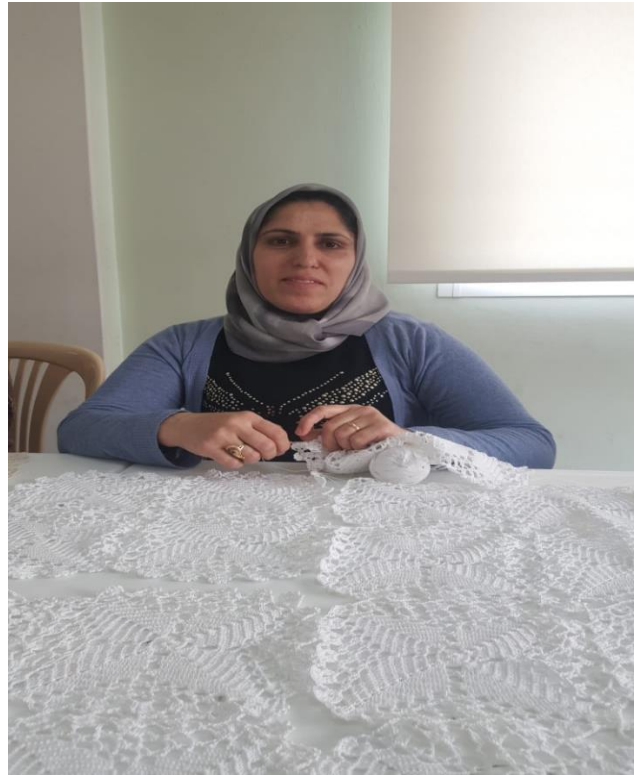
6. MECC Humanitarian activities February 2020:

Lebanon

- Conducted 3 Health Awareness sessions for 25 women, about anxiety and how to deal with it, nutrition, and healthy diet coupled exercises.
- Completed 12 MHPSS sessions for 53 women. Participants were divided into two groups depending on their mental health and needs.
- Concluded 8 sessions of PSS for 24 children focusing on activities that allow them to express their feelings.
- Conducted a GBV awareness session for 10 boys and girls where they engaged in identifying GBV and related risks and concerns in their community.
- Finished 9 soft skills sessions for 36 women in the form of crochet making.
- Held 3 capacity building sessions where 7 women participated in producing eco-friendly bags. During the first stages, MECC will purchase the bags from the women to encourage them.
- Completed 2 social cohesion courses for 15 Lebanese and 15 Syrians aimed at improving their social interaction, and building their capacities in effective communication and basic business development skills.



Health Awareness session (L) and MHPSS session (R), Feb 2020, Photo Credit: Diakonia.



Crochet soft skills sessions, Feb 2020, photo credit: Diakonia.



Eco-friendly bags which the participants of the capacity building session, produced, Feb 2020, Photo Credit: Diakonia.

Syria

- Completed health awareness sessions for 20 women in Damascus rural including distribution of blood pressure self-devices.
- Completed child protection courses for 43 teachers in Damascus rural.
- Completed labor market assessment in Izraa and Sheikh Maskin in Daraa governorate.
- Completed needs assessment in Darayya, Kisewh and Madaya in Damascus rural.
- Continued providing grants to 40 skilled workers in Maarba and Daraa AlBalad and 15 in Maaloula.
- Prepared to launch remedial classes for 450 students in Damascus rural and Aleppo.
- Completed tender process to purchase 2388 children winter clothing kits and hygiene kits and 2838 school kits.
- Completed tender process to select contractors to rehabilitate 4 public schools in Aleppo and Damascus rural.
- Completed tender process to purchase cattle fodder for 400 beneficiaries in Daraa governorat



Child Protection course for 43 teachers in Damascus rural, Feb 2020, Photo Credit: Diakonia.



Health Awareness sessions for 20 women in Damascus, Feb 2020, Photo Credit: Diakonia.



7. CONCLUSION

While geopolitics and armed struggles continue to shape the region, Christian solidarity thanks to the MECC and the Church leaders, is regaining its momentum to counter those two polarizing elements. While its efforts have yielded so much results in terms of drawing further attention to human dignity, ecumenism, and diakonia, yet there is so much to be done. There is no doubt that we operate, in a challenging environment, full of ambiguities and unknowns. However, with the participation of all parties, we are better planned and prepared to react to any new events.