



مجلس كنائس الشرق الأوسط

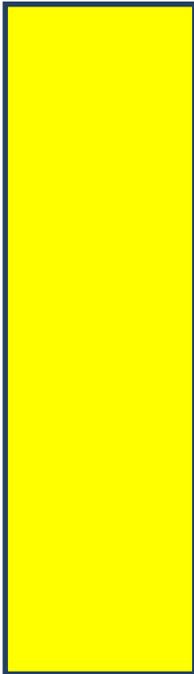
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MIDDLE EAST OVERVIEW

May 2019



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1. BACKGROUND

During the month of May, the Middle East continues to be a victim of power politics among major actors in the region. Instead of relying on negotiation and constructive dialogue, one major power has decided to send additional forces to the region, thus exacerbating tensions with regional players. Furthermore, the UNRWA Palestinian agency will be witnessing a budget cut. Yet again, the humanitarian crisis forced by the ME wars and struggles is once again being ignored.

Luckily this month, the Middle East Council of Churches, have been working tirelessly to rectify such mistakes. It has held a successful partners meeting which shed light on the dark ramifications, and which aimed to bolster humanitarian response, wherever it may be needed in the region.



2. THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION

Egypt

- The latest estimates acknowledge that Egyptian economy will expand by 5.3% at the end of June.¹
- Egypt's annual urban consumer price inflation decreased to 13% from 14.2 per cent in March, according to statistics agency Capmas.²
- Seeking to cut its borrowing costs and broaden its fund-raising initiatives, Egypt will be boosting reserves with bonds and has made plans to issue companies such as Panda, Samurai, sukuk and green bonds starting this July³.
- The volume of foreign investments in government debt instruments increased to \$16.8 billion.⁴
- Egypt is planning to plant 100,000 million olive trees by 2022 to boost the country's oil production. It will offer land for investors to accomplish such a massive project.⁵
- To increase the country's oil production, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi issued orders on the 9th of May, to develop the oil industry in the area of Ras Badran in the Gulf of Suez.⁶
- Over 150 heritage buildings in central Cairo, which are in needed in dire rehabilitation, will be revamped by the government to rent them out⁷.
- 17. 0311 EG/USD official currency exchange rate.⁸

¹ Thomson Reuters, May 11, 2019, https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/economy/story/Egypt_economy_to_expand_53_by_end_June_this_year-SNG_144237895/

² The National, May 9, 2019, <https://www.thenational.ae/business/economy/egypt-inflation-eases-as-economy-strengthens-1.859536>

³ Global Finance Magazine, May 09, 2019, <https://www.gfmag.com/magazine/may-2019/egypt-and-morocco-boost-reserves-bonds>

⁴ Egypt Today, May 08, 2019, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/3/70158/Foreign-investments-in-gov-t-debt-instruments-hit-16-8B>

⁵ Al-monitor, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/05/egypt-plant-million-olive-trees-local-demand-exports.html>

⁶ Middle East Monitor, May 09, 2019, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190509-egypt-sisi-issues-orders-to-explore-oil-in-suez/>

⁷ Al-monitor, May 13, 2019 <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/05/heritage-buildings-historic-cairo-egypt-private-sector-.html>

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



Jordan

- In a newly reshuffled endeavor launched by the government to reboot the economy, the cabinet throughout this month held a series of meetings aiming to do so.⁹
- In response to the reshuffle, The Jordanian Professional Associations Council criticized the authorities' oppressive methods carried out against protesters who rejected the recent cabinet reshuffle. They called on political and economic reform in the country to face internal and external challenges through a national conference.¹⁰
- The IMF releases 166 million USD to fund the economy after it has reviewed the government's performance.¹¹
- Oil shale power station to generate 15% of Jordan's electricity at a capacity of 470MW, covering 15 per cent of Jordan's electricity needs, by next year.¹²
- The latest projections for Jordan's GDP for the year 2019 is estimated to be 2.3%.¹³
- 1.428 USD Jordanian official currency value.¹⁴

Iraq

- Iraq this month has signed an agreement with global energy major Exxon Mobil and PetroChina to raise production at southern oilfields of Nahr Bin Umar and Ar-Ratawi to 500,000 barrels per day (bpd) from the current 125,000 bpd, expecting to incur an additional 400 billion USD.¹⁵
- Russian oil company Gazprom claimed that the daily production at its Garmian oil field in Iraqi Kurdistan had reached 35,000 barrels per day.¹⁶
- The nation's GDP is expected to rise by an additional 4%, due to increased oil production¹⁷.

⁹ Global Times, May 12, 2019, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1149501.shtml>

¹⁰ Middle East Monitor, May 13, 2019, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190513-jordan-trade-unions-call-for-reform-through-inclusive-conference/>

¹¹ Thomson Reuters Zawya, May 6, 2019,

https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/economy/story/IMF_endorses_second_review_of_Jordans_economy-SNG_143853097/

¹² Jordan Times, May 8, 2019, <http://jordantimes.com/news/local/oil-shale-power-station-generate-15-jordans-electricity-needs-next-may>

¹³ Global Times, May 12, 2019, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1149501.shtml>

¹⁴ <http://statisticaldb.cbj.gov.jo/index?action=level4>

¹⁵ The National, May 15, 2019, <https://www.thenational.ae/business/energy/iraq-s-53bn-energy-deal-to-boost-finances-and-support-economic-growth-moody-s-says-1.861703>

¹⁶ Reuters, May 16, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-gazprom-neft-iraq/russias-gazprom-neft-says-oil-output-at-kurdistan-field-at-35000-bpd-idUSR4N22Q015>



- Foreign companies such as Siemens and General Electric will be increasing the size of their investments.¹⁸
- Iraq signs a deal with Kuwait to prevent double taxation and financial evasion for income and capital taxes.¹⁹
- 540 Dinar /USD Iraqi official currency exchange rate.²⁰

Lebanon

- Several protests were recorded during May as a result of the stagnating economy and rumored austerity measures.²¹
- PM Saad El Hariri during the month assured that the country is far from bankruptcy, yet the economy still needed reform.²²
- The Finance Minister, quoting the World Bank, claimed that the country is not doing enough to enact economic reforms.²³
- The promised 11 billion USD CEDRE funds are yet to be received.²⁴
- Lebanon during May, has successfully repaid \$650 million maturing Eurobond via the central bank.²⁵
- 1507.5 LBP/ USD Lebanon official currency exchange rate.

¹⁷The National, May 15, 2019, <https://www.thenational.ae/business/energy/iraq-s-53bn-energy-deal-to-boost-finances-and-support-economic-growth-moody-s-says-1.861703>

¹⁸ Fitch Solutions, May 03, 2019, <https://www.fitchsolutions.com/infrastructure-project-finance/foreign-investment-boost-iraqs-power-infrastructure-03-05-2019>

¹⁹ Aawsat, May 14, 2019, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1722031/kuwait-iraq-sign-deal-avoid-double-taxation>

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

²¹ Annahar, May 20, 2019, <https://en.annahar.com/article/974423-protesters-attempt-to-storm-lebanons-government-headquarters>

²² Alarabiya, May 6, 2019 <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/business/economy/2019/05/06/Hariri-says-Lebanon-far-from-bankruptcy-cites-risks-of-no-reform.html>

²³ Alarabiya, March 30, 2019, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/business/economy/2019/03/30/World-Bank-Lebanon-economic-reforms-not-at-expected-level-.html>

²⁴ The Arab weekly, May 17, 2019, <https://theArabweekly.com/lebanons-youth-losing-hope-over-economy>

²⁵ Reuters, May 21, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/lebanon-bonds-payment/lebanon-paid-650-million-maturing-eurobond-on-monday-with-central-bank-help-sources-idUSL5N22X4X5>



Palestine

- In response to US President Donald Trump's attempt to establish peace between Palestine and Israel, a US-led conference will be set up next month in Bahrain. Yet, Palestinian factions are denouncing the meeting and asking the authority not to attend.²⁶
- The World Bank estimates that transfers to Palestine from Israel constitute two thirds of PA revenues and 15% of Palestinian GDP.²⁷
- The Bank of Financial Group reported a gross income of USD 56,255,539 in Q1 2019.
- 480 million USD will be sent by Qatar to Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza strip in terms of health care, education, and humanitarian aid.²⁸
- The Palestinian contractors union in the Gaza strip is undergoing preparations for a conference in September that will witness the attendance of 250 Arab contractors and businessmen from the Arab world.²⁹
- During the beginning of May, Italy has contributed 1.9 million Euros for the sake of UNRWA operating in Gaza.³⁰

Syria

- The U.N. deputy humanitarian chief warned that further military operations in northwest Syria's Idlib province will overwhelm aid efforts, stressing that an estimated 3 million people are caught up in crossfire in the last rebel stronghold.³¹
- China is planning to open a permanent trade center in the Adra Industrial City near Damascus³².

²⁶MEE, May 19, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/trump-mideast-peace-plans-economic-component-be-revealed-june-bahrain>

²⁷ Carnegie, May 02, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/79050>

²⁸ The Guardian, May 7, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/07/qatar-send-480m-help-palestinians-west-bank-gaza-israel-ceasefire>

²⁹Al- Monitor, May 9, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/05/gaza-construction-union-conference-promote-ailing-sector.html>

³⁰ Relief Web, May 03, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/italy-contributes-eur-19-million-unrwa-health-programme-gaza>

³¹ Washington Post, May 28, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/un-warns-more-idlib-military-action-will-overwhelm-aid-needs/2019/05/28/514c215a-816b-11e9-b585-e36b16a531aa_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.d150c5f3b031

³² Syrian-Chinese Business Council, 20-5-2019, <http://sbc.sy/en/2019/05/21/permanent-chinese-trade-center-in-adra-industrial-zone/>



- A Russian company is negotiating with the Syrian government to rehabilitate two grain silos in the ports of Lattakia and Tartous.
- The General Establishment of Geology and Mineral Resources (GEGMR) has asked the Ministry of Economy and Foreign Trade to stop imports of salt following an increase in domestic production.
- Syria and Iran held on May 1st the sixth edition of a joint business forum.
- Official Current Exchange Rate SP/USD: 437.5 SP/USD

Cyprus

- In front of the presidential palace, hundreds of public contract workers staged a protest and called for a meeting with President Nicos Anastasiades and cabinet members, demanding the same treatment as their colleagues with permanent contracts.³³
- The latest forecasts for Cyprus's GDP is 3.5% for 2019.³⁴
- DBRS Ratings Limited (DBRS) has placed Cyprus' Long-Term Foreign and Local Currency at BBB (low).³⁵
- At the end of March, Cyprus noted a severe drop in unemployment. It fell by 13.4%.³⁶
- The latest shipping revenue estimates for Cyprus has amounted to 528 million USD in the second half of 2018 noting improvement over the past years. Analysts deduce that the trend should continue throughout 2019.³⁷
- 1.1139 USD Euro official currency value³⁸

³³ Cyprus Mail, May 15, 2019, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2019/05/15/contract-workers-protest-outside-palace/>

³⁴ Financial Mirror, May 9, 2019, <http://www.financialmirror.com/news-details.php?nid=36928>

³⁵ Cyprus Mail, May 18, 2019, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2019/05/18/dbrs-confirms-cyprus-at-bbb-low-stable-trend/>

³⁶ In Cyprus, April 4, 2019, <https://in-cyprus.com/number-of-registered-unemployed-down-an-annual-13-4/>

³⁷ Seatrade-Maritime, May 10, 2019, <http://www.seatrade-maritime.com/news/europe/shipmanagement-generates-1-14bn-for-the-cyprus-economy-in-2018.html>

³⁸ https://www.ecb.europa.eu/stats/policy_and_exchange_rates/euro_reference_exchange_rates/html/eurofxref-graph-usd.en.html



3. THE REFUGEE SITUATION (Updated)

Egypt

- 29,584 foreign residents and refugees for Hepatitis C have been screened by The Egyptian Health Ministry.³⁹
- Annual inflation rates started picking up in 2019. This has led to an increase in the cost of the minimum expenditure food basket for Syrian refugees in Egypt.⁴⁰
- Refugees in Egypt, as reported, are still facing legal and societal barriers such as racism that prevents them from integrating within Egypt.⁴¹
- As part of a Washington initiative to settle Palestinians in Egypt, the White House is seeking to invest billions of dollar (precise figure is still unknown) for such an endeavor.⁴²

Jordan

The UNHCR states that there are currently 660,393 registered refugees in Jordan as of mid-April. There are no updates for May.

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

- 195,404 in Amman Governorate (29.6 %)
- 159,923 in Mafraq Governorate (24.2%)
- 137,539 in Irbid Governorate (20.9%)
- 95,112 in Zarqa Governorate (14.4%)
- 19,336 in Balqa Governorate (2.9%)
- 13,337 in Madaba Governorate (2%)
- 9,749 in Jarash Governorate (1.5%)
- 8,906 in Karak Governorate (1.3%)
- 8,182 in Maan Governorate (1.2%)
- 6,855 in Ajlun Governorate (1.0%)
- 3,542 in Aqaba Governorate (0.5%)

³⁹ Egypt Independent, May 13, 2019, <https://egyptindependent.com/egypt-screens-29584-foreign-residents-and-refugees-for-hepatitis-c-minister/>

⁴⁰ Relief Web, March 31, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/wfp-syria-regional-situation-report-03-march-2019>

⁴¹ El Balad, May 6, 2019, <https://www.elbalad.news/3814473>

⁴² New York Times, May 19, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/19/us/politics/trump-middle-east-peace-plan.html>



- 1,737 in Tafilah Governorate (0.3%)
- In a report published by the Government of Germany, HelpAge International, and iMMAP, older people belonging to Syrian refugees are facing increased economic risk, the reduction of food intake, exposure to unsanitary water and unhealthy conditions, and other various problems which impact their livelihood.⁴³
- Up until May, over 125,000 work permits have been issued for Syrian refugees since 2016.⁴⁴
- In an attempt to decry the Trump administration's new policy concerning Palestinian refugees, King Abdullah II of Jordan, tells Senate Foreign Relations Committee in closed meeting that he is frustrated by the Administration's "Deal of the Century".⁴⁵

Iraq

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

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

- 129,664 in Erbil (51.2%)
- 88,262 in Dahuk (34.8%)
- 32,247 in Sulaymaniyah (12.7%)
- 1,102 in Anbar (0.4%)
- 2,116 in other areas (0.8%)⁴⁶
- The United States has urged Iraq to promote the successful reintegration of children of alleged Daesh terrorist group fighters and provide them with services offered to refugees.⁴⁷
- Human Appeal International (HAI) signed an agreement with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, to allocate funds for the benefit of refugees and displaced in a number of countries including Iraq.⁴⁸
- About 1.5 million displaced people still live in about 20 camps scattered throughout the country.⁴⁹

⁴³ Relief Web, May 22, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/profile-older-people-jordan-experiences-and-inclusion-risks-older-syrian-refugees-and>

⁴⁴ Relief Web, May 8, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/unhcr-jordan-factsheet-april-2019>

⁴⁵ Palestine Chronicles, April 24, 2019, <http://www.palestinechronicle.com/jordan-no-to-alternative-home-for-palestinian-refugees/>

⁴⁶ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/15>

⁴⁷ Sputnik News, May 22, 2019, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201905221075215249-usa-iraq-daesh-fighters-children/>

⁴⁸ Relief Web, May 9, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/hai-ajman-allocates-aed-one-million-support-refugees-and-displaced-worldwide>

⁴⁹ Middle East Monitor, May 24, 2019, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190524-more-than-one-million-iraqi-refugees-spend-ramadan-in-camps/>



Lebanon

- Since the 31st of April, the number of registered refugees in Lebanon is 938,531.
- Refugees in Lebanon are distributed as follows:
 - 341,234 in Bekaa (36.4%)
 - 246,996 in North Lebanon (26.3%)
 - 239,005 in Beirut (25.5%)
 - 112,296 in South Lebanon (11.9%)⁵⁰
- Japan contributed 3.5 million USD to the United Nations refugee agency to support education programs for over 100,000 Lebanese and Syrian refugee students in Lebanon.⁵¹
- The UNHCR and Italy pledge nearly 2 million USD for refugee health.⁵²
- President Michel Aoun emphasized that Lebanon cannot survive the Palestinian and Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon. He called on Western countries to accept the refugees' return to their countries as soon as possible.⁵³
- Cutaneous leishmaniasis, a skin disease, have been recorded in northern Lebanon, during a test on 48 patients. There are fears that it might spread if not addressed.⁵⁴
- A number of relief projects have been jointly launched by Saudi Arabia and UNRWA in the Bekaa Valley, to provide aid to Palestine refugees.⁵⁵

Syria

- During the month of April 2019 (reported in May), the humanitarian community tracked 56,355 IDPs displacements across Syria. The largest IDPs movements of 34,863 IDPs were noticed in Idlib governorate, the great majority of which was internal displacement within Idlib governorate with about 18,822 IDPs, while about 11,776 IDPs were displaced from Idlib governorate to the opposition NSAGs controlled parts of Aleppo governorate. The second large displacement was tracked in Aleppo governorate with about 21,081 IDPs, the great majority of which came from

⁵⁰ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71>

⁵¹ Daily Star, May 11, 2019, <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2019/May-11/482915-japan-gives-unhcr-35m-to-support-locals-refugees.ashx>

⁵² Daily Star, May 08, 2019, <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2019/May-08/482629-unhcr-italy-pledge-nearly-2m-for-refugee-health-care.ashx>

⁵³ Middle East Monitor, May 19, 2019, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190510-lebanon-wont-survive-with-palestinian-syrian-refugees-says-aoun/>

⁵⁴ Natureasia, May 22, 2019, <https://www.natureasia.com/en/nmiddleeast/article/10.1038/nmiddleeast.2019.74>

⁵⁵ Aawsat, April 25, 2019, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1694416/ksrelief-launches-humanitarian-projects-lebanons-beqaa>



Idlib governorate as mentioned above, and the rest was internal displacement within the NSAGs controlled parts of Aleppo governorate with about 8,717 IDPs and about 600 IDPs from Hama governorate.

- More than 200,000 people were displaced between 1 and 16 May, while 20 health facilities, three IDP settlements, and one refugee camp were reportedly affected by hostilities in Northwest Syria. This number is in addition to those people displaced prior to that date. There are unconfirmed local reports that up to 25 schools have been affected since the beginning of May.

Cyprus

- Employment mentorship workshops for refugees have been launched by the European University, in which refugees are instructed about the job-searching process and about how to write a CV.⁵⁶
- 86% of Mediterranean migrant arrivals to Spain and Greece, have been recorded to be coming primarily from Italy, Malta, and Cyprus.⁵⁷
- There are currently about 10,000 asylum seekers in Cyprus, one of the highest ratios per capita in the EU.⁵⁸
- Cypriot reception refugee camps are still suffering from lack of affordable housing, which has created a homelessness problem.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ In Cyprus, May 21, 2019, <https://in-cyprus.com/employment-mentorship-workshops-for-refugees-by-the-european-university/>

⁵⁷ Relief Web, May 24, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/spain/mediterranean-migrant-arrivals-reach-19830-2019-deaths-reach-512>

⁵⁸ Info Migrants, May 3, 2019, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/16644/cyprus-is-becoming-new-entry-point-for-migrants-trying-to-reach-the-eu>

⁵⁹ Info Migrants, May 3, 2019, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/16644/cyprus-is-becoming-new-entry-point-for-migrants-trying-to-reach-the-eu>



4. CHURCH ACTIVITIES

Egypt:

- On the 9th of May, Anba Sallib, the bishop of Mit Ghamr, Dakados, and Eastern Countries held a meeting with the workers of the Iberian churches on the occasion of the Feast of the Resurrection, during which he thanked them for their efforts during the Holy Lent, Epoch, and Easter.⁶⁰
- On the 12th of May, Pope Tawadros II of Alexandria, expressed his concern about the displacement of Middle East Christians during an interview. He stressed that forcing Christians to leave from the ME region is affecting Europe as well.⁶¹
- During his pastoral visit to Germany on the 17th of May, Pope Tawadros II of Alexandria distinguished between national role from the political role of churches. “Egypt’s church is not a political party” he stressed.⁶²
- A final draft law regarding personal status of Egypt’s Christians, are being prepared by three main Christian churches, after Eid al-Fitr. The law is intended to prevent any misunderstanding between the Church and the judiciary and to also address the issue of Copts who are seeking divorce.⁶³

Jordan:

- At the invitation of the Jordanian Bible House, heads of various churches met at the Dead Sea under the theme “The Bible and the Challenges of The Contemporary Man”. The sessions included many topics such as: The Bible and Addiction, social networking sites, homosexuality and abortion. Sessions were presented by the director of the Baptist School in Beirut, Mr. Tony Haddad, and was moderated by retired Major Imad Maayaa, head of the Jordanian Evangelical Society.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Albawab H News, May 09, 2019, <https://www.albawabhnews.com/3592654>

⁶¹ DW, May 12, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/ar/تفريغ-الشرق-من-المسيحيين-خطر-على-أوروبا-dw-البابا-تواضروس-أيضاً/48715792>

⁶² Middle East Monitor, May 20, 2019, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190520-egypts-churches-differentiate-between-national-political-roles-says-coptic-pope/>

⁶³ Egypt Independent, <https://www.egyptindependent.com/egypts-churches-to-sign-unified-personal-status-law-after-ramadan/>

⁶⁴ Alwatan Voice, May 25, 2019, <https://www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/news/2019/05/25/1246364.html>



Iraq:

- In the city of Sulaymaniyah, The Patriarch of Iraq's Chaldean Catholic Church, His Holiness Louis Raphael Sako prepared a banquet during the Ramadan period in celebration of the opening of the Hebron convent for nuns.⁶⁵
- The Hungarian government attended an inauguration ceremony for the opening of a church for Assyrian Christian community. At the ceremony, Tristan Azbej, state secretary in charge of the Hungary Helps program, read out a letter from the Hungarian prime minister, in which Viktor Orban voiced his government's commitment to protecting Christian communities and culture.⁶⁶
- Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil, voiced his concern about the retreating U.S personnel from the region, citing that this could cause the return of Christian persecution.⁶⁷

Lebanon:

- Patriarch Cardinal Mar Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, the former Patriarch of the Maronite Triune of Mercy, died on May 12 at the age of 99. The press office of the patriarchal edifice in Bkerki declared that "the Maronite Church is in mourning". In its public statement, it also claimed:

"With the great pain and sorrow associated with the Christian hope, His Beatitude Patriarch Cardinal Mar Bechara Boutros-Raii announces the death of Patriarch Cardinal Mar Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, the icon of the Patriarchal Vicar, the dean of the Maronite Church, and the leader of the nation. At three o'clock in the morning, Sunday, May 12, his spirit surrendered to the absolute will of God, moving to the house of the Father in heaven, after a trilogy of accompanying prayers from houses, churches, monasteries and others, and after days of medical care at the Hospital Hotel Dieu."

- The Patriarch of Iraq's Chaldean Catholic Church, His Holiness Louis Raphael Sako, the Patriarch of Antioch and the East of the Greek Orthodox Church, John X Yazji, His Holiness Patriarch Mar Ignatius Joseph III, Patriarch of Syriac Catholics of Antioch, The Roman Catholic Patriarch Youssef el Absi, Armenian Orthodox Patriarch Aram I Keshishian, Patriarch Gregory III Laham, and several other

⁶⁵ Saint Adday, May 15, 2019, <http://saint-adday.com/?p=32030&fbclid=IwAR2dN9Bz6qojEXAR29bLTTXbZcFKz1bJUJbLc5H1nI5vij9pplj0pPp-8Gw>

⁶⁶ Hungary Today, May 16, 2019, <https://hungarytoday.hu/govt-official-attends-inauguration-of-church-built-in-iraq-with-hungary-assistance/>

⁶⁷ Angelus News, May 17, 2019, <https://angelusnews.com/news/catholic-news-agency/archbishop-of-erbil-is-the-us-abandoning-christians-at-risk-in-iraq>



religious figures attended the burial ceremony of former Patriarch of the Maronites Nasrallah Sfeir. Patriarch Mar Bishara Boutros Al-Raii presided over the event.

- A delegation from the Armenian Catholic Patriarchate headed by the Catholicos of All Armenians, Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia, Krikor Bedros XX visited Bkerki to pay condolences over for the passing of former Patriarch of the Maronites Nasrallah Sfeir.⁶⁸

Palestine:

- His Majesty King Abdullah of Jordan donates money to the restore the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.⁶⁹
- Archbishop Atallah, the Archbishop of Sebastia from the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, once again criticized Donald Trump's latest announcement concerning the Golan Heights. He emphasized that the US's move will not change the region's identity.⁷⁰
- HE Dr. Talal Abu-Ghazaleh received the Archbishop of Sebastia from the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Palestine, Atallah Hanna. Both sides discussed the recent challenges facing Palestinian people, especially in Jerusalem and that Jordan reaffirms its commitment to the Palestinian people.⁷¹

Syria:

- The Greek Catholic Church of Our Lady, which was badly damaged during the war, reopens in Syria's Aleppo.⁷²
- His Holiness Ignatius Aphrem II, the Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church, visited Kerala between May 24 and 27, during which he prayed at the tomb of Ignatius Elias III and attended the Episcopal conference.⁷³

⁶⁸ Armenian Catholic, May 12, 2019, <http://www.armeniancatholic.org/>

⁶⁹ ICN, May 8, 2019, <https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/37061>

⁷⁰ Al Nour, May 20, 2019, <http://www.alnour.com.lb/news/politics/365910/>

⁷¹ Albawaba, May 15, 2019, <https://www.albawaba.com/business/pr/abu-ghazaleh-archbishop-hanna-voice-support-king-abdullah-ii%E2%80%99s-stance-jerusalem-1286083>

⁷² The National, April 24, 2019, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/greek-catholic-church-reopens-in-syria-s-aleppo-in-pictures-1.853119>

⁷³ Manorama Online, May 14, 2019, <https://english.manoramaonline.com/news/kerala/2019/05/14/jacobite-syrian-church-head-to-visit-kerala.html>



Cyprus:

- On the initiative of the Archbishop of Cyprus, Chrysostomos II the Orthodox patriarchs Theodoros of Alexandria, Ioannis of Antioch, and Theofilos of Jerusalem met in Cyprus, to strengthen collaboration between the Churches in a bid to protect Christians in the Middle East.⁷⁴

5. MECC HEADQUARTERS ACTIVITIES

MECC Partners Meeting

On the 7th of May, the MECC launched its annual Partner Meeting at the Dhour Chweir Evangelical Center-Ain el Qassis, where it lasted for three days. The attendees included representatives from local and international partners, as well as several religious figures.

During the first day, the meeting was divided into several sessions that discussed policies on human dignity, and the overall activities and achievements of the MECC departments over the year. As for the second day, Project “Kairos ME towards a Church Global Compact” was launched. Moreover, a series of workshops where the main highlight of the day. They focused on the prospective activities to be executed in the upcoming year and how much funds they will be requiring. As for the third day, MECC and its partners met with the President of the Lebanese Republic, as part of a protocol visit.

⁷⁴Asia News, April 23, 2019; <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Strengthen-collaboration-between-the-Churches-to-protect-Christians-in-the-Middle-East-46828.html>



MECC Partners included: The Chaldean Church- Babel Patriarchate; ACT Alliance; Archdiocese of Cologne; AVSI/ People for Development; Caritas Internationalis; Caritas/ Lebanon; Catholic Bishop's Conference of England and Wales; Church of Sweden; Churches for Middle East Peace; Danmission; EKD; ELCA; Embrace the Middle East; EMW (Germany); FELM (Finland); German Bishops conference; Mennonite Central Committee; NCA (Norwegian Church Aid); Pontifical Mission; Orthodox Youth Movement; Presbyterian Church (USA); Tear Fund; World Council of Churches). The presence of eminent NGO leaders such as Act Alliance Secretary General Rudelmar Bueno di Faria as well as many high ranking pastors and personalities were noted. May 7, 2019, photo credit: MECC Website.

Day 1

The first day was initiated with the Letter of blessing from His Beatitude Cardinal Mar Louis Raphael Sako read by his Auxiliary Bishop Robert Saeed Jarjees. HB Cardinal Sako stressed on the interactive and cooperated Christian media, involving youth in building the community and encouraging interfaith dialogue activities.

Next came the Panel: "Towards Policies for human dignity". Theological and Geopolitical Perspectives, which was moderated by Rev. Fr Roupheal Zougheib, National Director of the Pontifical Mission in Lebanon. Speakers included R.R. Habib Badr, President of the National Evangelical Union, and of the MECC Evangelical, and Mr. Ziad El Sayegh, MECC Policies and Communication Advisor. The panel was followed by a live discussion, which indicates how involved all the guests were.



Rev. Fr Rouphael Zougheib, R.R. Habib Badr, and Mr. Ziad El Sayegh, May 7, 2019, Photo Credit: MECC website

Afterwards, the WCC Programme Executive Peace Building in the ME, Ms Carla Khijoyan delivered a letter from the Secretary General of the World Council of Churches Rev. Dr. Olav Tveit to the MECC and Partners.



Ms Carla Khijoyan delivering a letter from the Secretary General of the World Council of Churches, May 7, 2019, photo credit: oikoumene.org

Then MECC Secretary General Dr Souraya Bechealany presented her 2018 report, which included a video of the last Executive Committee in January and a presentation detailing her activities and official visits.



Dr Souraya Bechealany presenting her activities and official visits, May 7, 2019, Photo credit: MECC website

The report highlighted new strategies and work guidelines for the MECC Secretary General present mandate, in anticipation for the 2020 General Assembly. Dr Bechealany also talked about the restructuring



process undertaken in the MECC Departments, mainly the Theological and Ecumenical Department, and the Communication and Public Relations Department, and the role of the Partners in the process. Mrs Seta Hadishian gave a report on the Archives.

In the afternoon, the different departments presented their reports to show how the Partners' projects and supports were rightly implemented. The reports used expressive videos, already a step ahead to impress the

audience. All Partners were given a copy of the 2018 Annual report, with a copy of MECC magazine "AL Muntada"- The Forum. Another gift was the CD of Chants from the ecumenical Taize Community.



MECC departments during the discussion sessions, May 7, 2019. Photo credit: MECC website.



Day 2

Following the Morning Prayer, Project “Kairos ME towards a Church Global Compact” was presented by Rev. Fr Roupheal Zougheib, Fr Gaby Hachem, MECC Director of the Theological and Ecumenical Department and Mr. Ziad El Sayegh. The abstract for a “Kairos ME Towards a Church Global Compact”, comes in response to the persisting political, security, demographic, and social turmoil with its impacts on the dramatic reduction of Christians in the Middle East.



The launch of Kairos Middle East, May 8, 2019. Photo credit: MECC website

After that, Mr. Rudelmar Bueno de Faria (ACT Alliance General Secretary) held an intervention in which the room was open for discussion.

Later on, three workshops were held the main three MECC departments: Theological and Ecumenical Department, Communication and Public Relations, Diakonia (ERS). Partners had chosen their field of interest and projects were discussed for the new phase in 2019.

To end the day, the Partners thanked MECC and expressed their satisfaction for the organization and reports, suggesting more exchange and double sided partnership rather than a one-sided relationship. More meetings could be held throughout the year between the Partners and the respective departments.



Day 3

The final day was marked with a protocol visit to The President of the Republic of Lebanon. President Michel Aoun stated that Lebanon would never survive with half a million Palestinian refugees and 1.6 million Syrian. Moreover, he emphasized his constant pursuit to strengthen the Christian presence in the East, backing the efforts of MECC in the same direction. Aoun called on the MECC to help the Lebanese government resolve the Syrians refugees' issue "by persuading Western countries to accept the refugees return to their countries as soon as possible



Lebanese President General Michel Aoun during a meeting held on May 9-2019 at the presidential palace, with a large group of MECC Delegates and Partners. The Delegation which was presided by MECC Secretary General Dr. Souraya Bechealany included Representatives from Egypt, the Holy Land, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Germany, Britain, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and the United States. Photo Credit: Presidential Palace.



DSPR Workshop in Istanbul (May 12-13)

The Department of Services to Palestinian Refugees (DSPR) in the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) held a coordination planning workshop in Istanbul between 12 and 13 of May 2019. The MECC Secretary General Dr. Souraya Bechealany and Dr. Audeh Quawas the President of DSPR Central Committee participated in the workshop, in the presence of the Central Committee members, as well as the Regional Directors.



DSPR meeting in Istanbul, May 12-13, 2019, photo credit: MECC website.

The participants discussed the ways of motivating the developmental and relief work within an Ecumenical Theology perspective, Communication and Networking dimensions, regarding the protection of the rights of the Palestinian refugees to a dignified life as well as the right of return, as stipulated in the resolutions of international legitimacy and the League of Arab States.

The participants agreed to launch an interactive Platforms emphasizing human dignity based on human rights standards and joint ecumenical action.



ATIME Meeting May 17-18

A New Start for the Association of Theological Institutes in the Middle East (ATIME) was marked by holding a meeting after 10 years of suspension, on May 17-18, 2019 in the Saint Augustine Center- Kafra – Lebanon. With the blessing of the Presidents of the Churches in the Middle East, the Association of Theological Institutes in the Middle East was re-launched after a strenuous endeavor by the MECC Theological and Ecumenical Department.



During the meeting, the executive board of the ATIME was elected and included representatives of the four families: Rev. Fr Tanios Khalil as President, Rev. Fr Edgar Al Haybi as Executive Secretary General, and Rev. Fr. Bishoy Hilmi Ibrahim Abdelmalek, Rev. Fr Bassam Nassif, and Rev. Samuel Razfi as associate executive secretary generals. May17-18. Photo credit: MECC website.

The Middle East Council of Churches congratulated the participants and considered that the Association's return to its activities had achieved a fundamental goal of building bridges and promoting joint ecumenical action in the fields of theological formation, and emphasized that the Theological and Ecumenical Department will increase its efforts to support the Association and to motivate its ecumenical work.



Furthermore, the participants from different Church families and theological institutes stressed on the necessity of elaborating a common ecumenical vision in order to meet the needs of the churches in the Middle East, in this delicate phase of our times. This could be implemented through collaboration in education, research, and ministry.

In conclusion, participants established recommendations for the road map that will launch the work of ATIME and its objectives, and the next meeting was set for October 2019, in Egypt.



6. MECC Humanitarian activities April-May 2019:

In Lebanon:

Literacy Course:

Through the life skills program undertaken by MECC in the South of Lebanon - district of Marjeyoun, a group of 20 Syrian women completed a literacy course in Arabic. The course consisted of 20 sessions of 2 hours each.



Literacy course session attended by 20 Syrian women, April, 2019 Photo Credit: ERS Lebanon





Cash Assistance:

MECC finalized the second distribution of cash assistance targeting 1000 beneficiaries (Syrian, Iraqis and Lebanese) in the Mount Lebanon area (No pictures documented).

Psycho Social: MECC completed the last sessions of the PSS program in Mount Lebanon which targeted 320 women, 50 men and 170 children.



PSS session targeting 320 women, 50 men, and 170 children, April 2019, Photo Credit: ERS Lebanon

Livelihood:

MECC conducted a home care project in Tripoli, North Lebanon Governorate, targeting 25 Syrian and Lebanese women. The course is comprised of 125 hours over 2 months to include 3 weeks of practical training.



Livelihood session for 25 Syrian and Lebanese women, April, 2019, Photo Credit: ERS Lebanon.

Home elderly care course:

The ERS Department “Diakonia” of the Middle East Council of Churches concluded a home elderly care course in the city of Tripoli in northern Lebanon, on Friday 24th of May 2019. This humanitarian program was carried out in cooperation with the LEAD Healthcare Consultancy and concluded by distribution of certificates and nursing kits to 22 women of different ages.



Home Elderly Course May 24, 2019, Photo Credit: ERS Website

The course included 125 hours of theoretical and practical lessons at the LEAD center, in some Tripoli hospitals and nursing homes, and focused on how to care for the elderly physically and psychologically.



Hand Craft Life Skills Project (no pictures documented):

A hand craft project organized in the Nabaa area was organized, to help refugee women to get over their social phobia in a foreign society, to give them an opportunity to go outside their houses and integrate with the receiving community, to provide them with jobs at minimal cost which requires minimum expenditure, and to secure a healing space with women who shares the same bad experience.

GBV workshop:

A gender based violence workshop against women session was administered to a group of 25 ladies at Our Lady Dispensary in Sad Bauchrieh, Mount Lebanon. Session was highly interactive and women were pro-active and intensely participated.



GBV workshop in Sad Bauchrieh, May 2019, Photo Credit: ERS Website



Milk for Growth Project:

MECC completed 3 sessions on “the importance of Milk for growth”. Sessions were given by Dr. Raymond Kamel, a permanent pediatric and a Nutritionist at Our Lady Dispensary in Sad Bauchrieh area. 50 Iraqi and Syrian women benefitted from the awareness sessions.



Milk for Growth Project, May 2019, Photo Credit: ERS website



Food Security:

Three workshops were held in Chadra, Ayn Yaacoub, and Jdide, to train women on how to market and sell their products, as a continuation of past Food Security projects.



Food Security Workshop, May 2019, Photo Credit: ERS website

Other Activities:

A Session on Gender Based Violence was given to a group of youth between the ages of 12 and 15 (8 Beneficiaries / 5 Syrian + 3 Iraqi) at Our Lady Dispensary. Topics covered: Early marriage risk/ domestic abuse / bullying / good touch bad touch. The session was highly interactive where the kids felt comfortable and safe. This allowed them to open up and participate. Similar activities help children identify any kind of abuse they are being subjected to and react accordingly. It builds their resiliency and self-confidence.

In Syria:

- Completed health awareness courses for 25 women in Maaloula, including distribution of hygiene kits for all participants.
- Completed remedial classes course for 50 students in grade 12 in Arbin in Damascus rural.
- Completed vocational training and business startup courses for 37 female and 13 male in Tartous and prepared to provide 25 persons with startup kits.



- Completed Crochet training for 24 women in Maaloula in Damascus rural including distribution of startup kits, and launch a new one in AlZabadani.
- Continued providing small grants to recover 23 broken businesses in AlZabadani.
- Continued agricultural project in several villages in Daraa governorate to distribute 200 micro gardening kits, 400 barley seeds and 760 fodder kits.
- Launched livestock project in Daraa AlBalad and Tassil related to dairy value chain.
- Prepared to launch waste management activities in Maarba and Daraa AlBalad.
- Prepared to launch rehabilitation of six schools in Kherbet Ghazaleh and Daraa AlBalad
- Continued preparation to launch livelihood project to rehabilitate 15 shops in Daraa and Aleppo.
- Continued preparation to launch health awareness sessions for 60 women in Daraa, Aleppo and Damascus rural including distribution of blood pressure devices and 240 hygiene kits.



Hairdressing and Chef training courses as part of the Vocational Training and Business Startup Courses for 37 female and 13 Male in Tartous, May 2019, Photo Credit: ERS Syria.



Crochet Training for 24 Women in Maaloula in Damascus Rural, May 2019, photo credit: ERS Syria



Health Awareness Course for 25 Women in Maaloula, May 2019, photo credit: ERS Syria



Providing Small Grants to Recover 23 Broken Businesses in AlZabadani, May 2019, Photo Credit: ERS Syria



7. CONCLUSION

While power politics is once again taking its toll on the peace building process, the MECC with its partners are aware of such a predicament. This is the first time in MECC history, the council has received such strong support for its projects and will be acting hastily to be prepared for any looming catastrophe. One can only hope, the MECC's relationship with its partners will continue to last and evolve therefore yielding outstanding results, for the sake of this troubled region and its populations.