

# Seeking Justice and Peace for All in the Middle East

*"Seeking Justice and Peace for All in the Middle East", statement of the WCC 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany*

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## Assembly

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### 11th Assembly

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*"Peace, peace', they say, when there is no peace".* Jeremiah 6:14; 8:11

*"Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."* Matthew 14:27

The World Council of Churches (WCC) looks to the Middle East region as the place of the historical origins of our faith where Jesus Christ was born, crucified and resurrected. The worldwide ecumenical fellowship has always sought to be in active solidarity with the Christians of the Middle East, who are living in continuation of an unbroken line of faithful Christian witness in the multi-religious contexts of their countries, making vital contributions to the vibrant diversity and development of their societies.

Upheavals, violent extremism using religion as justification, ongoing military occupations, discrimination and systematic violations of human rights, economic crises and corruption, absence of the rule of law, and other factors have contributed to an existential crisis for all in the region. This is particularly affecting vulnerable communities, including Christians who are facing displacement and mass migration.

In this 11th Assembly of the WCC in Karlsruhe, Germany, we **recognize** the threat to the future of the indigenous Christians and of all the people of the Middle East. We **affirm** that the best means of averting this threat is equal rights, inclusive citizenship, justice and dignity for all, without religious or racial discrimination. We **commit** to the guiding principles of “God’s justice and love for all of creation, the fundamental rights of all people, respect for human dignity, solidarity with the needy and dialogue with people of other faith” (CC Feb 2011) that remain the foundation of our ecumenical response to the region.

Sadly, the reality on the ground in different countries of the Middle East challenges this vision.

In Palestine/Israel, there is another wave of forced displacement of Palestinian people from their homes - sometimes on multiple occasions since 1948 – as in Sheikh Jarrah, Silwan, the South Hebron Hills, as well as in the rest of Area C. The expanding Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories, especially those encircling East Jerusalem, are illegal under international law and threaten fundamental demographic and political changes to the region. Moreover, they have so undermined any practical prospect of a two-state solution that this path towards a just peace now seems increasingly unviable.

The expansion of the settlements and the increased military presence that accompanies them have brought more suffering for Palestinian communities, with more encroachment on and seizure of Palestinian lands and properties, and increased systematic harassment and attacks by settlers (especially in the absence of the protective presence of international visitors during the Covid-19 pandemic).

In Gaza we have recently again seen an escalation of the vicious cycle of violence. The WCC categorically condemns all such deadly and destructive violence whether perpetrated by Israeli forces or by Palestinian armed groups. The situation in Israel/Palestine cannot be resolved by violence but only by peaceful means in accordance with international law.

We affirm the rightful place of the State of Israel in the community of nations and recognize its legitimate security needs. At the same time we affirm the right of the Palestinians for self-determination and that the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories since 1967, as well as settlement construction and expansion in the occupied territories, is illegal under international law and must be ended. We believe that it is only through an end to the occupation and a just,

comprehensive and lasting peace settlement that the security of both Palestinians and Israelis can be assured.

In June 2022 the WCC central committee observed that “[t]he discrimination against Palestinians is overt and systemic, and the ongoing half-century-long occupation continues to contradict the equal human dignity and human rights of Palestinians living under this system of control, while the response of the international community continues to reflect egregious double standards.” The recent suppression of several Palestinian human rights organisations by the Israeli authorities without any effective opposition by the international community is an emblematic example of this system of control and these double standards. For Palestinian people, the situation is sadly compounded by the grave failings of the Palestinian authorities, including reprisals against opposition leaders and the lack of legal and democratic accountability.

Recently, numerous international, Israeli and Palestinian human rights organizations and legal bodies have published studies and reports describing the policies and actions of Israel as amounting to “apartheid” under international law. Within this Assembly, some churches and delegates strongly support the utilization of this term as accurately describing the reality of the people in Palestine/Israel and the position under international law, while others find it inappropriate, unhelpful and painful. We are not of one mind on this matter. We must continue to struggle with this issue, while we continue working together on this journey of justice and peace. We pray that the WCC continues to provide a safe space for its member churches for conversation and collaboration in pursuing truth, and working for a just peace among all people of the region.

With regard to the particular situation of Christians in Israel/Palestine, we are hearing the pleas of the heads of churches in the Holy Land more than ever before in relation to mounting intimidation, violations, limitation of access to places of worship, and attacks by Israeli radicals and authorities on the Christian presence and identity in Jerusalem, threatening the Status Quo and the multi-religious and multi-cultural identity of the city.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, such as Syria after the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ of 2011 and Iraq after the 2003 invasion, the people have been victims of conflict, wars and proxy wars, geopolitical pressures, sanctions and international interventions, violent religious extremism, gross violations of human rights and of international humanitarian law, and economic crisis. This has led to straining the already weakened social fabric, social capital and trust, paving the way for

hate and demonizing and dehumanizing narratives of the other based on exclusionary constructions of the collective national identities.

Moreover, several United Nations reports have identified drought (resulting from climate change) as one of the driving factors to the onset of the conflict in Syria. After a decade of war that has already had a destructive impact on agricultural infrastructure and resulted in displacement of farming and herder communities, this extreme drought is turning Syria into a new climate hotspot. Furthermore, Iraq has been ranked the fifth-most vulnerable country to climate breakdown, affected by soaring temperatures, intensified droughts and water scarcity, frequent sand and dust storms, and flooding. Climate change challenges are seriously affecting the region and need to be addressed properly.

A prosperous life in dignity, safety and security can only be achieved under the rule of law, territorial unity, and through sovereignty of the political, judicial, cultural and economic institutions in both countries. Sustainable peace is assured if based on values of justice, equal citizenship and equal human rights for all.

We have greatly appreciated the opportunities presented by this Assembly for fellowship and Christian solidarity with sisters and brothers from the Middle East, and for intensive ecumenical conversations and consultations on the path forward towards a just peace in the region.

The 11th Assembly of the WCC **expresses** the firm commitment of the worldwide ecumenical fellowship to strengthening our support for and cooperation with the churches of the Middle East, the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), faith-based and civil society partners, in order to seek a just and sustainable peace in the region.

The 11th Assembly particularly calls on:

- The members of the worldwide ecumenical fellowship to listen to the voices and repeated pleas of the churches and Christian communities of the region, and to accompany them in prayer and action.
- All member churches concerned for lasting peace and security for all in the Middle East to engage actively in efforts of dialogue with all sides in order to find a solution that respects and upholds the human rights and inclusive citizenship for everyone living in the region.
- The worldwide ecumenical fellowship of churches to consult and reflect on an alternative policy, perspective and comprehensive solution for

Palestine/Israel where all people have equal rights before the law, as opposed to the current systems of control, exclusion and discrimination.

- The WCC to examine, discuss and discern the implications of the recent reports by B'Tselem, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International, and for its governing bodies to respond appropriately.
- The WCC, its member churches and partners to support and maintain the vital and precious work of WCC programmes in the region, such as the Jerusalem Liaison Office (JLO), the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) and the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum (PIEF), engaging a wider WCC constituency together with the local churches, Christian communities and other faith partners.
- The WCC to strengthen its newly created transversal programme on racism so as to include the Middle East region.
- The WCC to increase its efforts in its present programmatic work in collaboration with its member churches in the Middle East to articulate principles for living together peacefully in post-conflict societies with equal citizenship, human rights and dignity.
- The WCC to facilitate encounter and dialogue in the diverse multi-religious and multi-cultural societies of the region, especially of Syria and Iraq, to help protect these countries' religious, ethnic and cultural diversity, and to promote social cohesion.
- The international community to call for lifting the unilateral sanctions on Syria that are harming the population rather than achieving their stated goals.
- The government of Israel to lift the blockade on Gaza.
- All Christian sisters and brothers to join in prayer for the release and safe return of the Syriac Orthodox Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim and the Greek Orthodox Archbishop Paul Yazigi who were kidnapped more than nine years ago. "These beloved bishops have become iconic figures of all those unjustly detained, tortured, and forcibly disappeared persons." (WCC press release April 2022)
- The worldwide ecumenical fellowship of churches to join in prayer for the people of the Middle East, including Lebanon whose people are suffering from very difficult conditions of life.