

VOICES FROM THE SOUTH

E-Newsletter -October 2015

Refugee Crisis in Europe: The Middle East Council of Churches' Point of View

This month's newsletter features excerpts from a recent speech by Fr. Dr. Michel Jalakh, Secretary General of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), entitled "Refugee Crisis in Europe: The Middle East Council of Churches' Point of View". The speech was held at the Nordic Ecumenical Network on Migration gathering in Oslo, which looked specifically at national and regional responses to the influx of refugees and migrants to Europe in recent months. In these selected passages from the speech, Fr. Michel and MECC challenge us to explore the root causes of the migrant flow, to understand it was a crisis well before the migrants arrived to Europe, and to act quickly to protect the lives of many.



By: Fr. Dr. Michel Jalakh
Middle East Council of Churches (MECC)

On the context of the current wave of migration:

The chain of wars, crises, persecution, and oppression, forced around 20 million people to flee their homes in the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and elsewhere. Every day an estimated 42,000 more join them. Many of them head for Europe, creating an acute crisis and anti-refugee politics in Western and other wealthy countries.

Syrians are fleeing Bashar al-Assad's regime, chemical weapons and barrel bombs; they are fleeing ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra which are subjecting Syrians to murder, torture, crucifixion, sexual slavery, and other appalling atrocities and killings. Somalis, Afghans, Eritreans, and others are fleeing dictatorship, political and sectarian repression, brutal violence and ethnic cleansing.

Today with the growing intensity of violence in Syria, and the diminishing resources of UN agencies and international organizations in humanitarian assistance, refugees have ended up being underfunded and crowded

in camps in the neighboring countries. The camps have become more crowded and undersupplied, which leaves the people who live in them cold, hungry, and subject to the ravages of disease.

Seeing little future for their families in the camps, and knowing they may never be able to return home, many have decided to set out on the dangerous and uncertain journey for a better life in Europe. Their desperate need is driving them to take the difficult decision to flee with their families, risking drowning in the Mediterranean or dying on the roads, because the terrifying dangers of the journey are still preferable to what they face if they stay behind.

On Europe's response to the crisis:

It is the influx to wealthy countries that made the refugee crisis the headlines in the news. When children died in Syria, which rarely seized the developed world's attention, it had come to seem routine. But as more refugees left camps in places such as Jordan or Turkey, and set out for wealthier countries, the crisis become far more difficult to ignore.

Most of these Syrian refugees fled to the neighboring countries of Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq. To put things in perspective: Lebanon whose surface is half that of the island of Sicily and whose population does not exceed 4 million has received over



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The Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) is a fellowship of churches relating itself to the main stream of the ecumenical movement, and is a representation of the Christian presence in the region.

The MECC seeks to serve the needs of the broader society, by engaging in diaconal work, advocacy, and training on behalf of the whole church.

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 Photo page 2: Middle East Council of Churches, MECC Executive Committee Members

2 million Syrian and Palestinian refugees.

Most EU member States do not want to take their fair share in welcoming refugees. The entire Europe whose population is 500 million is debating since weeks about receiving 120.000 refugees.

The result is that at a time when more people need help, rich countries are more reluctant to help them – putting thousands or millions of innocent refugee families in danger. Countries are trying to restrict refugees from getting to or staying within their borders.

On the fear of the other in Europe:

I believe that now we are living the true globalization. What affects other could not but affect me. What hurts other will hurt me. When injustice is practiced elsewhere or abroad, it will sooner or later impact me.

Wars, clashes, conflicts, extremism etc., that one time were “far away”, were “there”, were only heard on radio and seen on TV, now they are nearby, in our countries, in our neighborhoods, in our towns and villages. They affect our daily life and complicate our habits and habitual behavior.

Taking in large numbers of refugees means accepting that those refugees might bring changes to a nation’s identity and culture, change that can feel scary. Al-

ready European and Western countries feel threatened by immigration, today the refugee crisis makes them even more uncomfortable.

Shall we remain silent or look the other way when it comes to children who die of hunger or from bombings, immigrants who drown in the search for a better tomorrow, refugees who cross borders and break down boundaries, the victims of terrorism, wars, violence, drug trafficking, weapons trafficking?

How to overcome complex political forces that drive xenophobic, right-wing populism, and anti-immigration policies? This is the challenge of Europe now.

On the arms trade and how to resolve the refugee crisis:

The refugee problem in Europe is a direct result of our inactivity, or better our erroneous and distorted activity towards Iraq, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and in particular, globally, ignoring and pretending not to see the stated red lines of arms trade and weapons business. Economic and political interests have taken priority over peacemaking and dialogue.

In his speech to the UN in September, Vladimir Putin stressed the following: “It is hypocritical and irresponsible to make loud declarations about the threat of international terrorism while turning a blind eye to the chan-

nels of financing and supporting terrorists, including the process of trafficking and illicit trade in oil and arms. It would be equally irresponsible to try to manipulate extremist groups and place them at one’s service in order to achieve one’s own political goals in hope of later dealing with them”.

Pope Francis has put his finger on the core problem saying the following: “Some powerful people make their living with the production of arms and sell them to one country for them to use against another country [...]. It’s the industry of death, the greed that harms us all, the desire to have more money”.

The refugee crisis can only be resolved when all concerned shoulder their responsibilities, and when we avoid doing that hypocrisy of speaking of peace while manufacturing weapons.

From now on, we should be convinced that peace cannot be but our daily work, our ordinary life, our love, our care. We are called to fight for the most vulnerable. More than ever, the Middle East needs justice and peace, not only to end the flow of refugees, but so that displaced people can return to their homes in dignity and respect. ■

The speech in full can be accessed at http://www.karibu.no/upload/Migration_Crises_MECC_2015.pdf.

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