

THINKPEACE

Middle East: Searching for the Word

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At the request of the Superior General, a group of Jesuits involved in the Middle East wrote the following text. It is primarily a call to the conscience of everybody in the light of what many Christians are living today in the Middle East.

At the root of the tragedy that we are living today in the Middle East we find local, regional and international conflicts; we also find the competition between world powers to control the resources of the region; and then we find the internal struggles for social justice, for freedom and for the emergence of political regimes that respect human dignity.

The present tragedy makes us most often experience a variety of feelings: revulsion at murderous madness, extreme weariness about a peace that seems unattainable, and powerlessness to act in a geopolitical context that is difficult to understand.

Every element of society is affected by such madness, beginning with the various Christian, Muslim and Jewish communities, especially in Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen, but also, to one degree or another, in many other countries in the area. In the face of this tragedy, we must break the silence and rouse our consciences, at the individual level and at the level of the international community.

Part One: An alarming situation

The severe and precarious living conditions for people in countries that are torn by conflicts appear clearly in the figures that international agencies provide. Just to mention Syria: according to OCHA, 13.5 million Syrians (out of an estimated population of 22 million in 2010) need humanitarian aid, 4.8 million have already left the country to seek refuge in neighbouring countries or in Europe, and 6.6 million are displaced within their own country because of violence.

Christian communities are obviously among those who suffer from this appalling situation. Two recent declarations, both signed by Pope Francis (one with Patriarch Bartholomew on 25 May 2014, and the other with Patriarch Kirill on 12 February 2016) made this clear. The first statement focused especially on the situation of *Churches in Egypt, Syria and Iraq, which have suffered most grievously due to recent events.*

In a similar way, the [second statement](#) pointed out that:

In many countries of the Middle East and North Africa, whole families, villages and cities of our brothers and sisters in Christ are being completely exterminated. Their churches are being barbarously ravaged and looted, their sacred objects profaned, their monuments destroyed.



It is with pain that we call to mind the situation in Syria, Iraq and other countries of the Middle East, and the massive exodus of Christians from the land in which our faith was first disseminated and in which they have lived since the time of the Apostles, together with other religious communities.

For the first time in UN history, the Security Council set up a meeting on 27 March 2015 about the situation of Eastern Christians and other minorities. At that meeting, the Secretary-General of the UN, Ban Ki-moon, mentioned the grave dangers that minorities face in some countries of the Middle East, and [added that](#) millions of individual lives and the social

fabric of entire countries are at stake.

Such statements and initiatives reveal, among other points, the extent to which the centuries-long presence of Christians in the Orient is now under serious threat. According to [the estimate](#) of the General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East in 2010, the region might have had, on that date, approximately 20 million Christians (5.62 per cent of the population), among whom there were 5.7 million Catholics (1.60% of the population) in 16 countries.

In addition to Jerusalem and the Palestinian Territories, these countries included Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Cyprus, Egypt, UAE, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Syria, Turkey and Yemen. Since then, the situation has only deteriorated in many of these countries.

Faced with this situation, Christians across the Middle East — and especially in Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Egypt — experience deep anguish and desperation about their own future. Many have emigrated and many are waiting for the opportunity to take the road to permanent exile in the West.

Origins of this misfortune

Various reasons lie behind the hardships suffered by Christians. Sometimes Christians are identified with the West, against which a deep resentment inhabits the minds of many Muslims since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, but especially since the creation of the State of Israel and the start of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Sometimes Christians are targeted because they are simply the weakest element in society, and they may be accused of providing support to existing regimes. Sometimes, the mere fact that they are Christians is unbearable for the more radical elements of the Islamists. Thus, Christians are the natural targets for the bursts of violence that rip the Middle East apart, but these blind acts of violence spare no constituent community in these countries.

After the hopes that the Arab Spring of 2011 raised, Christians and a good number of the inhabitants of the area now live in deep uncertainty. The situation has become relatively stable in Egypt today, but it remains volatile and uncertain in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya, where military operations have become increasingly international.

It is not possible to forget the situation in the Holy Land, where the lack of a political settlement creates permanent tensions between Palestinians and Israelis, leading to outbursts of violence from which both peoples suffer.

Great expectations

However, the tragedy of Christians in the Middle East and all Arab peoples should not prevent anyone from seeing signs of hope in these popular uprisings. What do they signify?

The peoples in the area want a better life; successive regimes have failed to improve their societies; political Islam, which has often been the only organized opposition force, has completely failed to produce systems of government that could integrate the principles of modernity.

At the beginning of the uprisings, people called for dignity, expressed desires for emancipation based on the values of modernity, democracy, human rights, social justice, and cultural openness facilitated by means of communication.

These uprisings did not translate into concrete and successful programs in the economic and political fields. The persistent weakness of central authorities, faced with the challenges of their countries, and the absence of oppositions with unified and clear policies have dramatically given way to chaos, to sudden bursts of extremism, and to foreign intervention.



Part Two: Necessary awareness to imagine another future

We hear the cry of those men and women who are Christians, Muslims and of other religious beliefs. We share their suffering due to present violence, and their loss of confidence in the future. Yet we cannot stand aside and merely acknowledge the tragedy that is taking place before our eyes. Christian hope and responsibility urge us to work with others so that the forces of division and death do not continue their devastation.

At the heart of policy: speaking in a meaningful way

The crisis in the Middle East is primarily a *crise de la Parole* [crisis of the word]. Suppressed or censored speeches, truncated or deceptive statements, declarations disconnected from the lives of people ... all these have led to a virtually complete political bankruptcy. It has also corrupted the cultural and religious spheres.

Peoples in the area yearn to finally have the right to speak openly. Especially in the political arena, people demand the freedom of expression that is often perverted by patronage, tribalism, corruption and the manipulation of religions. Groups that stand close to political circles often misappropriate economic life.

Democracy and transparency are often referred to, but used as mere terms in speeches and solemn proclamations; they are not actually looked for or promoted. Minorities soon find themselves relegated to the margins of national life, at best tolerated, but quickly suspected or attacked as soon as instability overwhelms countries.

Education for democracy requires a resolute commitment from everyone, starting with national political authorities, and also involving all educational institutions. As a matter of fact, it is through culture, mutual knowledge and meetings with others that distrust, prejudice and simplistic readings of reality disappear, making it possible to weave a viable social fabric. Learning to listen, to talk together, to respect everyone, to give an appropriate place to the individual as well as to the community, to manage conflict, these are urgent civic and educational needs.

Education for citizenship requires genuine familiarity with human rights and reflection about the concept of 'laicity' (understood as citizenship that recognizes and respects cultural and religious plurality). Under these conditions, religion will have its appropriate place in the public arena and will be able to make positive contributions to living together.

Groups who have monopolised power often hold politics hostage. As a result, withdrawal to one's own community most often seems to be the least bad solution. One of the challenges is to ensure that men and women who are representatives have genuine access to political responsibilities, thus allowing for a renewal of the ruling classes. In many countries, this prospect may seem out of reach. Although it will take time, such a goal should receive top priority.

In our countries, it is crucial to discover the importance of the concept of the 'common good' and to enshrine it in laws as well as in political and economic practice. This involves working to change the mentalities and structures of common life in order to promote the equal dignity for all.

Spiritual and religious renewal is urgent

The crisis in the Middle East also has a spiritual and religious dimension. The tragedies affecting the area, the shrinking of public space, and the persistent economic difficulties lead many people to consider the rites and traditions of their own communities as the only places where they can affirm their human and spiritual identity. Yet there are many who can no longer see any meaning in their lives and who have even lost trust in their religious leaders.

The interweaving of religion and politics has contributed to blurring responsibilities and interests over a long time. In many situations, religious leaders have a political role. Many problems, primarily political in nature, were not treated as such, and so they gradually abandoned the political arena for the religious sphere, with all the risks of communitisation or even radicalisation.

Christian identity

As a result, the Christian identity in the area is severely shaken. What does it mean to be a Christian today in the Middle East, the region where Christianity emerged? What does it mean to follow Christ in the present situation? What kind of Christians are we training? How are we witnessing to truth and justice?



Christian identity cannot be mere identity in opposition (Christian because not Muslim or not Jewish). Nor can it be reduced to keeping some ritual and liturgical traditions – important though they may be. Nor can it be used merely to provide added value to some plan to migrate. Christian identity should contain a positive and responsible affirmation, one that is renewed by genuine spiritual experience at both the personal and ecclesial levels.

As different Synods and meetings of the Eastern Churches have **stated many times**, such a call to spiritual and theological renewal means, in one way or another, the deliberate choice for dialogue and discussion even within Churches. Then,

beginning with their Pastors, it also means the quality of giving witness, the dedication to simplicity of life in the spirit of the Gospel, and a prophetic distance vis-à-vis political power. It must also include the genuine and courageous commitment to build unity among Churches, a unity that the Christian people need so strongly.

Christian commitment

Such a Christian commitment involves developing a theology of 'spiritual resistance'. Through this the Christian deepens, at individual and community levels, the sense of belonging to Christ in order to find again the meaning of a presence that is sometimes undermined by violence and intolerance, or threatened by individualistic and consumerist trends.

Such spiritual roots will bring renewed impetus to make God's care, proximity and mercy known in different social realities, especially in education, in healthcare and in development. By choosing to commit herself again to such an attitude of openness, the Church refuses to withdraw into communities or confessions. In this way, the Church in the Middle East will advance human values at the service of all citizens, especially the weakest in society.

With Muslims

Christians may legitimately fear Muslim fundamentalism, the radicalisation of some branches of Islam, and group madness such as the Islamic State; these are legitimate sources of fear for Christians. In some countries, persecutions are severe; anti-Christian violence is obvious; and living together now seems to be part of some lost memory.

But we should not forget that many Muslims too are victims of the extremism that originates in their own religion. The deep crisis that Islam suffers goes beyond the Middle East and is an issue for the whole world. It has become increasingly difficult to know what version of Islam one is talking about since there are so many and complex situations, points of view, loyalties ...

At the heart of this crisis, all Muslims face the challenge of the relationship between their religion and history, modernity, and its capacity to engage in genuine research for interpreting their sacred texts. There is also the need to find ways for genuine dialogue, including the renunciation of violence, between the two major currents of Islam: Sunnism and Shiism.



More than ever, and as long as this is still possible, it is necessary to make encounters, even modest ones, possible. Personal knowledge of the other lowers the level of fear and promotes the renewal of trust. Then there is a common battle to fight in order to promote the establishment of a state of law that would be democratic and would respect the legitimate aspirations of individuals and constituent groups.

In the history of the area, Christians were involved in the cultural, intellectual and artistic Arab Renaissance (Al Nahda, in the 19th and 20th centuries), and they were active in social change; they still have much to offer in writing a new page in the life of this region. Their presence will be especially valuable when it comes to sharing with Muslims the challenge of entering into a form of communication that liberates, and to preventing the risk of isolation that would result from the disappearance of relationships with 'the other'.

International responsibility

It is not possible to look at this region, plagued by violent and deadly tragedies, without paying attention to regional and international influences and responsibilities. The will to bring about peace and stability goes beyond the sole responsibility of local actors. It is legitimate to question the policies and special interests — with their associated financial manoeuvres — that led to the present situation.

One hundred years after the Sykes-Picot agreement, which, in broad outline, had drawn borders in the region, it seems that we are back to a time for seeking new contours and balances, lest changes in borders and breakups of countries further weaken minority communities as well as the ability to live together.

Specific local powers and the international community as a whole are called to a sense of responsibility. They need to abandon the Machiavellian behaviours, passive attitudes and ideological battles that will only aggravate the onerous human, moral and cultural chaos that the Middle East has been experiencing for too long. In this regard, the just, fair and too-long-postponed settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian problem that has plagued the entire region for decades, would help to open new perspectives for mutual understanding and life together.

The choice to speak and to take responsibility for the quality of conversation with others is the first step in a long process of rebuilding the region. The Middle East has so much to offer to its inhabitants and to the world, and Christians have their place in this.

A note from Father General

This text does not claim to put forward an official position that would be promoted by the Society of Jesus or its Superior General, but it claims, on the basis of the experience of Jesuits who know the ground well, to offer for reading, reflection, discussion and action a general perspective on the role of Christians in the Near East.

How to use this text?

It is written to be known and discussed in Jesuit communities, but also in institutions and works connected with the Society of Jesus. I hope that those discussions will help awareness and lead to the development of new projects. The text can be reproduced in periodicals or used for meetings.

It is written to be brought to the attention of all those who, in the Church and in civil society, wish to have an echo, coming from the Near East itself, of what is happening in that part of the world. The attached document has not been written to remain in a drawer but to be widely distributed and brought to the attention of all interested persons.



Potential reactions to this document are welcome and can be communicated to the person who is responsible for the coordination of this cell for reflection, Father Antoine Kerhuel SJ (eoc-a@sjcuria.org).

A further note to Jesuits

The Near Eastern Province is pursuing its mission and increasingly seeking ways to be more and better present in the heart of the Arab world, while the latter is itself in crisis.

Today I wish to launch an appeal to the generosity of Jesuits for volunteers to serve the mission of the Society in the Near East, in one or other country, in the light of needs specified by the Provincial.

Some of these volunteers could be Jesuits who already speak Arabic or who show that they are ready to learn that language. Their support will give the Provincial much needed flexibility to face the current demands of mission in that part of the world.

Every deployment is certainly the fruit of a discernment that each Jesuit must make in an exchange with his own Provincial. If this discernment leads to availability for such deployment to the Near East, it is the Provincial of the Near East, Father Dany Younès (provincialpro@gmail.com), who should be contacted.

I commend to our prayers and to our concern all the peoples whom we wish to serve in the Near East.

Photos: 1) Destruction in Syria; 2) A child at the Jesuit Refugee Service centre in Jbeil centre sits in an English class; 3) Fr Frans van der Lugt inside the monastery where he hosts Muslim and Christian families from Homs whose homes have been destroyed in the violence; 4) JRS staff visit refugees in Iraq; 5) A man distributes food aid at the storage centre in Aleppo. Photos courtesy of Jesuit Refugee Service Middle East and North Africa

