

Middle East Christian Leadership Conference in Brussels

2013-11-07

November 5-6, 2013

“The Christians in the Middle East are ethnic cleansed, seek international recognition”

A historic conference organized by the The Middle East Christians Committee (MECHRIC), a federation of NGOs, including Coptic, Maronites, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syriacs, Melkites and others, was held in Brussels on November 5th to 6th at the Thon Hotel, with one main session held at the European Parliament. Titled “Leadership Emergency Conference” the event included two days working sessions, a political dinner with European Union officials attending, and a general session held at the European Parliament chaired by lawmakers. The conference was organized to assess the present situation and challenges facing the Christians in the Middle East and discuss new strategies to address these challenges, including new international outreach.

MECHRIC history

MECHRIC is the oldest coalition of Middle East Christian organizations launched in Beirut in November 1981 by Maronite, Coptic, Assyrian, Chaldean, Syriac and other groups to represent the aspirations of these and other communities in the Near East and North Africa. While the founding Secretariat General of MECHRIC remained in the Middle East, the international secretariat general relocated to Washington in the early 1990s and held several summits and meetings including at the US Congress as of 2000, and in several cities around the world.

With the escalation of violence and political suppression against Christian communities and individuals across the Greater Middle East region, particularly since the so-called Arab Spring, and with the failure of the international community to identify this persecution as one of the major crises in the region and internationally, the representatives of the Middle East Christian Committee held a leadership conference in Brussels to reassess the situation in the Middle East, exchange views and develop new strategies in defense of the human rights and community rights of these communities, and by ripple effect to all peoples in the region.

The goals of the leadership conference were as follows

1. Form a wide consultative council of leaders from various NGOs and delegates to help shape strategies and outreach
2. Assess the situation in the region, country by country and listen to reporting from various representatives coming from the Middle East.
3. Addressing the most urgent matters first but establishing a list of items to address and consider for forthcoming conferences and seminars.

The main issues assessed were:

1. The severe violence against Christians in Syria, Egypt and Iraq
 2. The political suppression of Christians in Lebanon and Iran
 3. The state of the Christian communities in the Greater Middle East including the Arab countries, Iran and Turkey
 4. The state of the cause of Middle East Christians in international media
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1. The position of the main international actors, including the US, Europe, Russia, the UN.

Participating NGO leaders

The leaders participating in the Conference represented the MECHRIC Secretariat General, Coptic Solidarity International, The World Maronite Union, members from the Assyrian National Federation/Council, advisors to the Chaldean National Council, and leaders of the Syriac Council, in addition to a Melkite representation. NGO leaders which participated in the Conference were:

- Sheikh Sami Khouri President, World Maronite Union
- Tom Harb, Secretary General, World Maronite Union, Regina Kantara representative, World Maronite Union Lebanon
John Hajjar, delegate of the Melkites Catholics
- Adel Guindy President, Coptic Solidarity International, France
- Magdi Khalil, Coptic Solidarity International, US
Helmy Guirguis Chairman, Coptic Solidarity UK
Sobhy Gress Coptic Association of France
- Sargon Lewie Assyrian American National Federation & Assyrian National Council
- Aprim Rasho Assyrian National Council
Attiya Gamri of the Assyrian Council of Europe, Dutch local lawmaker
Kino Nuri Swedish Assyrian Researcher
Ishak Betsimon, Assyrian Youth Federation Sweden
- Malik Aujeri , Assyrian delegation
Pauline Jasim, Coordinator of the Assyrian delegation
- Kassab Joseph T, Chairman Iraqi Christians Advocacy and Empowerment Institute (ICAE) and advisor to Chaldean Council, Detroit
Fehmi Yousif Mansoor, President of the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council, Iraq
- Yako Merogi, Canada Representative of Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council, Canada
Louay Noail Mikhail, Coordinator for Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council, Iraq
- Bassam Ishak, President, Syriac National Council of Syria,
- Hanibal Yacoub, Head of Foreign Affairs, Syriac Union Party,
- Lahdo Hobil, President, European Syriac Union,
Rima Tüzün, Vice President, Bethnahrin Women Union Europe and Head of Foreign Affairs, European Syriac Union
- Evgil Türker, President, Federation of Syriac Associations in Turkey
- Ibrahim Mrad, President, Universal Syriac Union Party, Lebanon
- Sabah Barkho, President, Bethnahrin Patriotic Union, Iraq

Opening Session

On November 5th, the president of the Conference Mr. Adel Guindy opened the first session with a minute of silence for the Christians who were killed in the Middle East at the hands of terrorists and oppressors. After he made some remarks on the importance of the conference, Dr. Walid Phares, the international NGO advisor from Washington DC took the floor to introduce the history of MECHRIC and its evolution

to the participants. The participants at the Leadership Conference at the Thon Hotel in Brussels included members of MECHRIC organizations and invited groups, including but not limited to Coptic, Maronite, Assyrian, Chaldean, Syriac and Melkite Christians. To assess the situation in the region, country by country reports and information were provided by various representatives from the Middle East. The conditions of following countries were viewed: Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey. Other main issues assessed included: the violence against Christians in Syria, Egypt and Iraq; the political suppression of Christians in Lebanon; the state of the Christian communities in the Greater Middle East, including the Arab countries, Iran and Turkey; and the state of the cause of Middle East Christians in international media.

During the working sessions, two MPs, one from Lebanese Parliament, Mr. Nadim Gemayel, and one from the Iraqi Parliament, Mr. Khalis Berber Ishoh, addressed the MECHRIC conference via Skype.

Political Dinner: EU representation

In the evening, the participants of the MECHRIC conference held a political dinner at the Silken Berlaymont with more than 12 political and diplomatic guests. The dinner was opened by John Hajjar, the Melkite representative from the U.S. Dr. Walid Phares gave a speech on MECHRIC and remarks followed by MEP Jaime Mayor-Oreja, First Vice-President of the EPP Group and president of the European Ideas Network (EIN), Mr. Patrice Bergamini, Head of division for regional policies on the Southern Mediterranean of the EEAS, representing Baroness Ashton, Foreign Minister of the political European Union, Mr. Vladimir Chizhow, ambassador of the Russian Federation Mission to the EU, Mr. Spyros Attas, Ambassador of Cyprus to the EU and Mr. Jean Louis Bosteels, representing the Order of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem. Among EU diplomats, officials, Think Tanks and NGO leaders who attended the event were Patrick Deboeck, representing Belgium Mission to the EU, Maciej Golubiewski, European Union EEAS Desk Officer Syria, Tomas Sikorskis, representing the Lithuania Mission to the EU, Andrea Rossi, European Union EEAS Human Rights Directorate, Dr. Stefan Gehrold of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Fr. Patrick Daly Secretary General of COMECE, Duke Paul de Oldenburg, Secretary General Europa Christiana, Jean Louis Bosteels, Order of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem, a representative of Europa Christiana, Roland Freudenstein director of the Center for European Studies, Kaspar Karampetian a director at the European Armenian federation for justice and democracy, Elizabeta Kitanovic representing the Confederation of European Churches, Mr. Paolo Casaca, former Socialist MEP and chairman of the EP delegation to NATO, currently director of the South Asia Democracy Council.

The EU Foreign Affairs representative, Mr Bergamini said in his remarks that “Europe is very concerned about the state of human rights in the Middle East, including for minorities, particularly Christian minorities. The violence directed against these communities threatens not only Christians but all other communities who are seeking coexistence and democratic values.” Bergamini said the Conference is a very positive development, which will help Europeans better understand the facts on the grounds and the possible measures the European Union and the international community could take to address these challenges.” MEP Jaime Mayor Oreja said “the European Parliament is very concerned about the persecution against Christians in the Middle East, particularly since the Arab Spring, and more specifically the terror attacks against these communities in Egypt, Syria and Iraq. We are looking forward for a partnership with the representatives of the Middle East Christians, especially via the NGOs seeking democratic culture in the region. The Russian ambassador Mr. Vladimir Chizhow condemned the Jihadist attacks against Christians in Syria and Iraq and the violence against Christian Copts in Egypt. He said “The Russian Federation wishes to raise these issues at the level of human rights discussion internationally.” Cyprus ambassador Mr. Spyros Attas said “his Government has been raising the matter on European and international levels” and he called on the conference to continue its activities worldwide so that “attention is brought to the matter.” Sheikh Sami el Khoury, speaking on behalf of the MECHRIC conference at the dinner said “the Christians of the Middle East are indigenous people and deserves recognition and protection.” Closing the speeches Dr Walid Phares clarified that the Middle East Christian communities

are targeted in as much as all civil societies and moderate Muslims are targeted by the extremists, organizations and regimes. “There are two types of challenges facing the Christian communities in particular: the relentless Terror attacks by the Jihadists and the political suppression by authoritarian regimes. Both types are to be addressed properly by Europe and the international community.”

The significant EU and international participation in the event demonstrated the importance of the MECHRIC conference and the issues it raised.

MECHRIC International Strategies

On November 6th, the second and final day of the conference, the delegation discussed a strategic assessment and the output of the MECHRIC conference through regional and international conferences, especially on how to address the UN, US, EU, Russia, Vatican and other international actors on the issue of the Middle East Christian persecution and political suppression. On this second day the delegations at the conference were invited by the European People’s Party (EPP Group), via its think tank EIN, to the European Parliament (EP) for a special briefings session. The delegations had the opportunity to report to Members of European Parliament (MEPs) and EPP leaders about the situations in Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey and to explain their demands and expectations.

MECHRIC Session at the European Parliament

The conference at the EPP was led by Mr. Jan Olbrycht, Vice-Chair of the EPP and Mr. Jaime Mayor Oreja, First Vice-President of the EPP Group and president of the European Ideas Network (EIN), as well as Guillermo Cazan Martinez, the co-secretary general of the Transatlantic Group on Terrorism, and the EIN executive director. The presence of other MEPs, including human rights specialists MEP Kelam Tunne from Estonia, and MEP Patrao Neves from Portugal revealed the wider interest of the EP on the situation of the Christians in the Middle East.

A message by Dr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, former U.N. Secretary General, to the MECHRIC leadership conference, was read at the Parliament by Mr. Magdy Khalil, Executive Director of the Middle East Freedom Forum. In this message Dr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali said: „Christians constitute indigenous national minorities in the Middle East societies. Their history and positive contributions, over thousands of years, are intimately associated with the history, civilizations and in the renaissance of their nations.”

At the European Parliament NGOs speakers, selected during the working sessions, gave their reports on behalf of the MECHRIC conference.

Sami Khouri, President of the World Maronite Union, who spoke as a head of the joint MECHRIC delegations to the European Parliament, said in his speech: „the Middle East is also our land, we belong there and our roots are there. We will not accept to be ethnic cleansed by the Jihadists and the Khomeinists.”

Adel Guindi, President of Coptic Solidarity said: „our populations are gradually eliminated from the Middle East under the watch of the West. The Arab Spring unleashed the Islamists with their ideological hatred to „infidels“.

Bassam Ishak, President of the Syriac National Council of Syria said: “for Syriac Christians and the majority of Syrians who seek a civil and democratic Syria the hypocrisy of the Assad regime must be stopped, its use and abuse of Syriac Christians to make false arguments that it’s the secular defender of ethnic and religious minorities must be called off. We want our voice heard as indigenous people of Syria regarding our future.”

On his part Fahmi Mansour, the Chairman of the Assyrian-Chaldean-Syriac Popular Council of Iraq said: we need to support our Christian villages in Iraq, help them remain on their own lands, with real policies, not empty promises. More than ever we are drastically in need of practical steps that can be translated on the ground to find a solution to the plight of our people rather than attending conferences and media gatherings.“

Joseph Kassab, Founder and President of the Iraqi Christians Advocacy & Empowerment Institute and an advisor to the Chaldean National Council, wrote in his testimony: „Special Administrative and cultural autonomy for Iraqi Christians in Nineveh Plain and Kurdistan is a solution to ensure the survival and prosperity of Christians in the area.“

Dutch Assyrian Lawmaker Attiya Gamri said: „we cannot understand this heavy silence in Europe while our native nations in the Middle East, particularly in Mesopotamia, are massacred and driven out of their homelands. When an ethnic group is the target of a systematic ethnic cleansing, the international community is under an obligation, both moral and legal, to protect them.“

Nuri Kino, an Assyrian investigative reporter said: 100 years after 1915, when we lost 4/3 of our people to the sword of Jihad, we are on the brink of another Genocide. Every day we get reports of atrocities. Our clergymen have been kidnapped and killed, our sisters and brothers have been raped and beheaded. Our nation and our religion are bleeding.“

Tom Harb, President of the World Council of the Cedars Revolution– USA Chapter said: “Hezbollah continues to interfere in the war in Syria, thus contravening every national and international law and continues to drive Lebanon away from its rightful place as an honourable citizen of the international community.“

Evgil Türker, President of the Federation of Syriac Associations in Turkey said : “Following the adhesion negotiations between European Union and Turkey and semi-normalization of the conflict in Turkey, Syriac people started to return back to their historical homelands. Syriac people have to guarantee their rights in the constitution and accepting their identity officially.”

John Hajjar, Melkite Catholic representative and National Director of the World Council of the Cedars Revolution said “this conference is about representing a Middle East Christian voice in the international community. And we say it clearly, while some who claim speaking about or in the name of Christians in the Middle East, rely on Islamist or authoritarian regimes in the region to preserve our communities as dependents on their sheer will, we declare here that our peoples should not be at the mercy of Terror regimes or Jihadi organizations. They should be able to defend themselves with the help of the international community.”

The conclusion of all reports was, to raise the issues in a policy paper to Western nations, demanding the internationalization of the issues for each suppressed ethnic group, calling for equal rights in certain countries such as Egypt and Turkey, and Federations such as in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. At end of the meeting, the members of the European Parliament expressed their deep concern and astonishment of the atrocities committed against the Christians in Middle East. MEP Jan Olbrycht, Vice-Chair of the EPP said “we in Eastern Europe have gone through a similar difficult situation where we were oppressed by a totalitarian regime and oppressed. But we re-emerged into freedom. We fully understand your situation and will help you explain it to the Europeans. MEP Jaime Mayor Oreja said “the European Parliament should be well informed about the persecution of your communities. MEP Kelam Tunne from Estonia reiterated the message of his colleagues and added: “I thank you for coming to the European Parliament and informing us about the situation of your communities. We have had previous panels organized by Professor Walid Phares in Washington DC during the summits of the Transatlantic Parliamentary Group (TAG) since 2008, where we listened to your colleagues and have been touched by their testimonies. As a

former activist in Estonia under Soviet occupation, I relate to the horrors your communities are going through. I can assure you that we will stand by you and will take action in support of your freedom.” Portuguese MEP Patrao Neves said “we will make sure your assembly will have its voice heard in the European Parliament and we will seek initiatives to help protecting your communities in the region.”

Lauching of the book “The Arab Spring“

Following the session, the European Parliament held a reception honoring the Conference’s advisor, Dr Walid Phares for launching his new book in French *Du Printemps Arabe a l’Automne Islamiste?* (From the Arab Spring to the Islamist Fall?). Chairman MEP Mayor Oreja (Spain) and MEP Kelam Tunne (Estonia), and NGO leader Regina Kantara, praised Phares “for his academic achievements and for his role as a bridge builder between US and European lawmakers and now between Western leaders and the civil societies in the Middle East.”

MECHRIC historical precedent at the European Parliament

The session at the European Parliament was the first one in history when Middle East Christian representatives addressed European lawmakers as a coalition.

With the various developments in the Arab Spring, Middle East Christians, numbering around 25 million inside the region, have been submitted to violence and ethnic cleansing in Syria, Iraq, and Egypt in addition to political repression in Lebanon and Turkey. Through this MECHRIC leadership conference, MECHRIC and its affiliates were able to launch an international outreach in order to inform decision makers in the West about the gravity of the situation and consult with these actors about potential initiatives.

More initiatives are expected in the near future. Tom Harb, general coordinator of the conference and Rima Tuezen, executive coordinator, said “now that the conference has put the aspirations of the Middle East Christians on the international scene, we hope and will work on advancing the international outreach of this representative coalition, under MECHRIC wings.” Adel Guindi, the President of the Conference said “MECHRIC will now move forward to organize itself, and develop strategies for the near and medium future. We count on the leaders who participated to work closely among each other and within their communities to help our embattled peoples in the Middle East.”