

IDOP 2016

REMEMBERING 20 YEARS

The Middle East and North Africa developments in recent months

The security and human rights situation in much of the Middle East and North Africa continues to be volatile, often with implications for the Christian communities of the region.

In **Sudan** a campaign of harassment of Christians, including the intimidation or imprisonment of church leaders, has seen church leaders as well as political separatists portrayed as 'agents of the West'. In spite of thawing international relations, concern about human rights in **Iran** persist – particularly about high execution rates but also arrests of Christians (79 arrests of Christians were recorded between May and August 2016). The issue in **Iraq** of the seizure of Christians' property has been noted in the northern Kurdish region in addition to Baghdad.



More positively, the enactment of long-awaited legislation on the construction of churches in **Egypt** has been broadly welcomed by church leaders, even though some areas of ambiguity remain such that decisions about building and repair of churches could still be at the whim of local governors. **Morocco's** Ministry of Education has ordered the revision of some curriculum content that incited violence against non-Muslims, and there have been some helpful calls in local media for greater religious freedoms and recognition that Moroccan Christians can still be loyal Moroccan citizens. The **United Arab Emirates** have announced plans to build on the recent 'Marrakesh Declaration' on the rights of religious minorities, especially in the field of education. The frequency of extremist 'price tag' attacks against Christian (and other non-Jewish) targets in **Israel** has dropped following more

effective action against perpetrators. However, many Christian schools in Israel are in severe financial straits due to the government's discriminatory funding policy. **Tunisia's** Ennahda party, a member of the governing coalition, has announced it will cease pursuing an Islamist agenda.

As violence has continued in **Syria**, church leaders have warned that despite its rebranding and distancing from al-Qaeda, Jabhat Fateh al Sham (previously Jabhat an Nusra) remains just as dangerous for Christians and other disapproved religious communities. Meanwhile, President Assad has given assurances to Christians that a new Constitution will 'eliminate discrimination toward religious minorities', while some opposition leaders have made similar pledges. King Abdullah of **Jordan** has reaffirmed the importance of the Christian presence in the Middle East and upheld his country as a model of co-existence – affirmations that have been welcomed, even if some restrictions in Jordan persist, especially for believers from Muslim backgrounds. Following suicide bombings in the predominantly Greek Catholic town of Qaa, church leaders in **Lebanon** have also emphasised the need to preserve Christian-Muslim co-existence. Some Christian political movements in **Iraq** have renewed calls for safe zones or autonomous areas for minorities – proposals not endorsed by all church leaders. In **Palestine**, Gaza's Christian communities continue to dwindle – as elsewhere in the region, believers from Muslim backgrounds feel especially vulnerable and many seek to move out of the region – and there is fear in the West Bank that Islamists are positioning to take over the Palestinian Authority reins when President Abbas departs.

Turkey's increasingly authoritarian response to terror attacks by so-called 'Islamic State' (against civilians) and by Kurdish separatists (against state targets), and then to the attempted coup by Gulenists on 15th July, has been reflected in purges of perceived dissidents from state institutions and increased restrictions on freedom of expression, including media restrictions. Although religious minorities have not been a general target in the purges, hate speech against minorities has increased and some churches and Christians have been falsely accused of having Gulenist links. Stringent restrictions on freedom of expression have also been noted in **Algeria**, with a high-profile blasphemy case against a Christian. Somali Christians in Kenya have expressed concern about Kenya's decision to close refugee camps, fearing forcible repatriation to **Somalia**.

Please pray for the Middle East and North Africa:

- for the Christians of the Middle East and North Africa region - that they will continue to witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ despite discrimination, denial of freedoms, imprisonment, torture and abuse by state security forces or extremist groups
- for believers from Muslim backgrounds, who are frequently abused by their families and communities, and are often unable to have fellowship with other Christians
- for official recognition of the church in all of the countries of the region
- for peace and justice throughout the region

Information compiled by:

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In the modern church calendar, the first two Sundays of November is set apart to remember and pray for the persecuted church, through the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church (IDOP).

Organised by the Religious Liberty Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance, the IDOP is a time set apart for us to remember thousands of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world who suffer persecution, simply because they confess Jesus Christ as Lord.