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Refugee Crisis in Europe:

The Middle East Council of Churches' Point of View

Fr. Dr. Michel Jalakh

MECC Secretary General

Distinguished participants,

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

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 increasingly an anti-refugee politics in Western and other wealthy countries.

However, Europeans who are best suited in those countries to take these refugees, insecure and fearful over the effects of immigration, preoccupied with national identity, are driving populist ideas and policies that contribute to the crisis.

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.

The main driver of this crisis is Syria. Four million people have fled the country since the war began in 2011. They 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.

Most of these Syrian refugees fled to the neighboring countries of Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq. Lebanon alone hosted around 1.3 million Syrians of which 400,000 students and ar. 13,000 newborns per year. In Jordan and Turkey, UNHCR stranded the Syrians in refugee camps, while in Lebanon they

are free within the country, except at the borders where refugee camps are erected by UNHCR.

Today with the growing intensity of violence in Syria, and the diminishing resources of UNHCR and international organizations in humanitarian assistance, refugees have ended up being underfunded and crowded in camps in the neighboring countries. 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.

Of course in the marathon towards Europe, these refugees are not only Syrians but Somalis, Afghans, Eritreans, fleeing dictatorship, political and sectarian repression, brutal violence and ethnic cleansing.

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.

The fleeing mobs for safety are not just a collection of individual humanitarian disasters but also a global refugee crisis stemming from the so-called “Arab Spring” that hit the Middle East in 2011. The Arab Spring was perhaps the largest single spark of the ongoing global refugee crisis.

Although, the European Union, United States, and Kuwait respectively pledged \$1.2 billion, \$507 million, and \$500 million for aid to refugees but it is still far short of 5.5 billion in aid that the UN says is needed for these refugees, as well as another \$2.9 billion for displaced Syrians within Syria. As a result, 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.

Local NGO's and volunteers, working day and night to support insufficient state services now stretched to breaking point, described the situation as "utterly overwhelming."

Hundreds of thousands of refugees have made their way to Europe, with most crossing the Mediterranean in insecure and unbalanced boats and rubber yachts, so tragedies are inevitably frequent. According to UNHCR estimates, 2,500 people have died just this summer while attempting to make the crossing.

It is the influx to wealthy countries that made the refugee crisis the headlines of the news. Tragedies like the deaths of 71 people who suffocated in the back of a smuggler's truck in Austria. When children died in Syria, which rarely seized the developed world's attention, sadly, and unjustly, it had come to seem routine. But when they died in the back of trucks in Austria, or in the Mediterranean while trying to reach Greece, that's much harder to ignore.

As the crisis grew, and particularly as more refugees left camps in places such as Jordan or Turkey or Greece and set out for wealthier countries, the crisis become far more difficult to ignore. Desperate families are reaching the shores and borders of Europe.

Within Europe, countries are trying to restrict refugees from getting to or staying within their borders. Hungary has erected a razor-wire fence along its border with Serbia to prevent refugees from crossing into Europe over land. The Hungarian government also shut down train service to Germany to discourage refugees from using Hungary as a transit country on their way to seek asylum there.

Today that the crisis is growing out of control and there is no plan to handle it, most EU member States do not want to take their fair share in welcoming refugees. To its credit, Germany has been the only European state to show a moral leadership. UK showed signs of change and plans to accept "thousands" of Syrian refugees, but how many, it is very vague.

The US so far has resettled only 1,434 Syrian refugees, and has pledged to take only a few thousand more.

Just to give you an idea: Lebanon whose surface is half that of the island of Sicily and whose population does not exceed 4 million has received over 2 million Syrian and Palestinian refugees, while the entire Europe whose population is 500 million is debating since weeks about receiving 120.000 refugees.

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.

And there lies the real problem: Already European and Western countries feel threatened by immigration, today the refugee crisis makes them even more uncomfortable or scary. Thus the rise of anti-immigration populist movement in EU. The US presidential candidate Donald Trump has created a wave of anti-immigrant sentiment to the top of the polls in the presidential campaign, which shows how strong those feelings have become.

The fear of refugees and migration is fear of simply change, change in the neighborhood, change in character and culture, in the nation, values and beliefs, and so on.

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

What role can Christians, faith based organizations, or MECC can play in the current chaos of refugee marches to Europe? Can churches have any impact on current affairs of refugee crisis?

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.

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. 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... and above all weapons trafficking? Yes, here is the focal point of the major conflicts in our world.

As said earlier, Germany has been the only European State to show a moral leadership in welcoming refugees. It proposed to accept 800,000 Syrians while Britain, France, the United States and others are still very reluctant to speak up. However, do you know that Germany is the third biggest exporter of military weapons in the world? Do you know that the five biggest weapons exporters accounts to 75% of the volume of global arms exports? And we still wondering and asking ourselves which way fellow to stop the flux of migrants?

In his speech at the United Nations 2 days ago, Vladimir Putin has 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 channels 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 the hope of later dealing with them or, in other words, liquidating them" (September 27, 2015)

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.

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". In his address speech few days ago to US Congress, the Pontiff has pointed: "We have to ask ourselves: Why are deadly weapons being sold to those who plan to inflict untold suffering on individuals and society? Sadly, the answer, as well all know, is simply for money: money that is drenched in blood, often innocent blood. In the face of this shameful and culpable silence, it is our duty to confront the problem and to stop the arms trade".

Refugee crisis can only be resolved when all concerned shoulder their responsibilities and avoid living 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. Again, as Pope Francis said: “peace is not an industrial product, peace is a home-made product”.

Economic and political interests have taken priority over peacemaking and dialogue. Nonetheless, 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 Middle East Council of Churches is fully integrated in this process vision of peace building and reconciliation.

Thank you!