

STATEMENT BY THE BISHOPS ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Recently, violence has greatly increased in the Middle East – in Syria, Iraq, Palestine, and Israel – sowing destruction and bringing seemingly endless anger, suffering, and fear. We are deeply moved by the plight of the people affected, and compelled to find ways to alleviate their suffering. We cannot remain silent in the face of injustice and distress.

We believe in making peace. Reconciliation can be a reality and is achievable in the midst of war and chaos. We condemn the use of all forms of violence and all oppression of people, whether it is physical, mental, or structural in nature. We cannot accept people being driven from their homes, their being forced into warfare, or their being used as human shields.

The international community must react quickly whenever groups of people are made the targets of inhumanity and brutality. However, a sustainable peace requires long-term work to embed the acceptance of diversity and the respect for human rights that make civil society possible. This will only be achieved through the redirecting of funds towards education and the creation of economic equality.

We call upon all involved to reflect on their convictions and to accept the diversity that surrounds them. We believe that through genuine dialogue a shared future can be built and the humanity and equality of all defended. We challenge ourselves and other religious leaders, at the levels of both local and international dialogue, to stand together for peace and unequivocally condemn the use of religion as an incitement to violence and for the subjugation of others.

We encourage parishes and Christian individuals to pray for peace, for peacemakers, and for victims of violence. We pray also for those who perpetrate violence, that their hearts may be turned.

We support all parties and actors who seek to promote justice and reconciliation in countries torn apart by war. We encourage our own nation's decision makers and the members of our church to support the work of lasting peace. We urge the leaders of our country, together with those of the other EU member states, to defend the freedom of religion and the rights of religious minorities around the world more clearly. Without a decisive response from the international community, the possibility for both Christians and other religious minorities to continue to live in the Middle East is placed in serious jeopardy.

We ask that respect and compassion be shown towards those who look to our country for sanctuary and the possibility of a better life. By giving immigrants the opportunity of education and employment, we assist them to have faith in the future. In this way, we can prevent the social exclusion and embitterment of young immigrants, and reduce the risk that they will be attracted by extremists towards the path of violence.

Christians are called to offer help to all people. It is therefore important, both theologically and ethically, that western aid for the victims of the wars in Syria and Iraq is not directed solely at helping Christians. However, we have a special duty to monitor and ensure that both international and local agencies are no less committed to the right of all to receive aid. We call on Finn Church Aid and the church's mission organisations to ensure that parishes and individuals are afforded concrete ways to support victims of war in the Middle East.

BISHOPS IN THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH OF FINLAND
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