

ANNUAL REPORT 2017



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INTRODUCTION

MEC supports people in the Middle East and North Africa who are marginalised, discriminated against or persecuted for being or becoming Christians.

Many have become immune to news of great suffering happening in the Middle East; our eyes glaze over when we watch news bulletins, pick up a newspaper or browse web sites. Nothing changes it seems, and we stop paying attention.

The work of Middle East Concern takes place behind the headlines. We never stop paying attention, because lives are at stake. The task is at times overwhelming and never-ending, but at the same time rewarding.

We know that MEC is making a difference in the lives of individuals and families. Our work of advising and encouraging and equipping is for the most part unseen, except by those we serve - our brothers and sisters who are persecuted for their faith. Even as we raise awareness, mobilise prayer and undertake advocacy, this is often to restricted or targeted audiences because of the sensitivities involved.

The past year has been both rewarding and frustrating. As you will see elsewhere in this report, MEC has engaged with 297 active religious persecution cases in 2017. Our dream could be to report one day that there is no reason for MEC's continued existence, that persecution has ceased in the Middle East and North Africa. Somehow though that seems unlikely; Jesus predicted his followers would face persecution. There was no time limit to that.

What you are reading is a snapshot of how we have served in 2017. It has been our privilege to stand with Christian believers of the 24 countries and territories of the region, to share with them in their sufferings.

Thank you for taking the time to read this report. As you discover what we have been doing, my prayer is that you will feel motivated to come alongside us to support what we do in any way possible, but especially through prayer. If real change is going to take place, in the Middle East or anywhere, it starts with the prayers of God's people.

Daniel Hoffman
Executive Director

REGIONAL OVERVIEW

For the Middle East and North Africa, 2017 was once again an eventful year. For the Christians in the 24 countries MEC serves, it was a year of challenges.

In **Egypt** the government's pledge to be the protector of Christians has been viciously tested by militants claiming affiliation with Daesh. In February this group intensified its threats against Christians in North Sinai Province, where they subsequently murdered seven Copts, prompting more than 100 Coptic families to flee from the Province. On Palm Sunday, church bombings in Tanta and Alexandria left 47 dead, prompting President al-Sisi to declare a three-month state of emergency which was subsequently extended. A further 30 people were killed in May when vehicles travelling to a monastery were attacked. In July the Egyptian government, in response to continuing concerns about the terrorist threat, requested that churches cancel all activities outside their regular worship services. However, the murder of a Coptic priest in Cairo in October, and attacks in Helwan in December that killed 12, emphasised the ongoing vulnerability. The most heinous attack by Daesh affiliates was carried out against the al-Rawda Sufi mosque in Northern Sinai on 24 November in which more than 300 were killed.

Ambiguity continued regarding building repair and licensing of churches. There were a number of attacks on Christians and their properties in Upper Egypt when there were suspicions of the construction or use of unlicensed church buildings. While some in the Coptic community are angry that the Egyptian state has failed provide effective protection, remarkable individual testimonies of forgiveness have emerged in the midst the atrocities.

Iraq remains deeply divided along sectarian lines, as long-held distrust and resentments persist between Sunni and Shi'a and between Arabs and Kurds. 2017 saw significant consolidation of Shi'a and Arab influence, accompanied by strengthened political and military influence of Iran. A key development was progress in the military campaign to remove Daesh militants from areas seized in 2014, including the Christian heartland in the Nineveh Plain. Mosul was substantially recaptured by July and in early December Prime Minister al-Abadi declared victory in the overall campaign. The return of those displaced by Daesh has started, including a few thousand Christian families, but significant trust issues remain, to say nothing of the formidable challenge of rebuilding infrastructure. Ten Christian political groupings agreed on a set of demands for protection which were submitted to the federal Iraqi and Kurdish regional governments, centring on the creation of self-administered cantons with international monitoring of security – though disagreements persist, and implementation is not imminent. On 25 September, the Kurdistan Regional Government proceeded with a non-binding referendum on



independence from Iraq, in which 92% voted for independence. Regional actors and the international community backed the Iraqi central government's rejection of the referendum outcome. Baghdad dispatched forces to confront the Kurdish Peshmerga in Kirkuk and other disputed territories which were quickly taken as the Peshmerga offered little resistance. This triggered the further displacement of civilians as thousands of Kurds fled from Kirkuk. Christian communities that had recently returned to Teleskof (following liberation from Daesh) were forced to flee once again. Kurdish President Barzani announced his resignation.

Conflict has ground on in **Syria**. Despite limited US airstrikes in response to a chemical attack attributed to President Assad by his opponents, the regime's confidence increased as international support for opposition groups waned. Russia and Iran reinforced their backing of regime forces, while the US supported Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Turkey backed the opposition Free Syrian Army to fight Daesh and limit Kurdish expansion. A key development came in late October when Raqqa, the self-declared capital of the Daesh 'caliphate,' fell to the SDF. Whereas some analysts optimistically thought this would mark the final phase of Syria's conflict, the situation has arguably become more complex: the defeat of Daesh had been a common goal of many factions, all with other grievances and points of rivalry which would then come to the fore. UN and human rights groups continued to highlight extensive rights abuses by many sides in the various conflicts. Many Syrian Church leaders continued publicly to endorse the Assad regime (either through conviction or obligation). In December, an Open Doors petition was delivered to the UN Secretary General calling for renewed effort towards settlements in which the equal rights of all Syrian and Iraqi citizens, including Christians, are upheld and protected.

In **Iran** the start of 2017 saw the death of former President Rafsanjani, considered by some to have been a moderating political influence. Hasan Rouhani was re-elected president of Iran in May, but his pledges to improve human rights remain unfulfilled. Christians, especially those from Muslim backgrounds, continue to be targeted by state authorities, with a number of Christians receiving prison sentences of 10 years or more for activities considered to be against the state. Increasingly strained relations with the USA, as President Trump prepared to cancel the nuclear enrichment deal brokered with the previous administration, reflected Iran's increased regional posturing in support of Shi'a groups (especially in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain and Lebanon), and of Hamas in Gaza. Shared concerns over Kurdish independence aspirations drew Iran and Turkey closer together.

Tensions remained high in **Turkey** as the state of emergency (introduced following the attempted coup of July 2016) continued, and presidential powers were bolstered in an April referendum. With foreign nationals among the thousands detained, the administration was accused of pursuing "hostage diplomacy" and relations with the EU, and especially with Germany, deteriorated significantly. Ties with Saudi Arabia and Egypt were strained over Turkey's



support for Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood, and differences with the US (primarily over support for Syria's Kurds) sharpened towards the end of the year. American pastor Andrew Brunson remains in detention in Izmir, and in August faced serious new accusations of espionage and attempting to overthrow the government and constitution – unfounded accusations that have been perpetuated by local media. Intervention by US President Trump was met with indignation. In June, Syriac communities in south east Turkey learned that more than a hundred church properties had been appropriated by state institutions, and Armenians complained of interference in the governance of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

The UN described the situation in **Yemen** as “the world’s largest humanitarian crisis” – a wholly man-made disaster involving warfare between troops loyal to president Hadi (backed by a Saudi-led coalition) and Houthi forces (backed by Iran) together with famine and cholera. Analysts note that crisis arose from mass weaponisation over many years, intransigence of belligerents, and indifference or facilitation of the international community – within what was already the region’s poorest and most water-insecure country. By the end of 2017 the political crises seemed to be deepening, with the December assassination of ex-president Saleh in Sanaa (by his one-time Houthi allies, angered by his suggestion that he might mediate with Saudi Arabia) and by rising assertiveness of Southern separatists. Within this grim context, the fledgling Yemeni local church, though vulnerable, is reportedly maintaining a clear witness.

In **Sudan** the government’s ongoing campaign of severe restrictions on churches continued. Christians detained in December 2015 received draconian prison sentences but were later given presidential pardons and released. However, the unjust campaign of appropriation and destruction of church properties has continued, accompanied by evictions, brutal attacks on protesters, and flagrant disregard for the rule of law. Meanwhile, President Bashir gave assurances of Sudan’s respect for religious freedom during a visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

In **Algeria** the Minister of Religious Affairs announced plans for new legislation to protect traditional Islamic values by further restricting dissenting expression or practice. However, entitlements churches should enjoy under the 2006 decree regulating non-Islamic worship continue to be denied by the authorities, with church leaders discerning increased antagonism towards Algerian Christians.

Emboldened by US support, **Saudi Arabia**’s Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman consolidated power with a wide purge, ostensibly to tackle corruption, but which also weakened potential opposition to his accession to the throne. Building on the major economic diversification plans announced in 2016, the Crown Prince pushed through some unpopular but necessary economic reforms and introduced some notable social reforms including a flagship announcement that women would be permitted to drive, starting in June 2018. Significantly, he also declared that Saudi Arabia would return to a moderate form of Islam. In November the Maronite Patriarch visited Saudi Arabia from Lebanon, though primarily with a political rather than religious agenda. Saudi Arabia continued its aggressive foreign policy, with tensions with Iran ratcheted up, particularly over Yemen, Qatar and Lebanon. Saudi Arabia’s role in leading the



coalition fighting the Houthis in Yemen has attracted widespread criticism on grounds that war crimes have been committed (accusations levelled at all sides in that conflict).

Libya has remained volatile and divided, with a UN-backed ‘unity government’ installed in Tripoli at odds with the rival Tobruk-based government. French-backed talks in July resulted in the rival leaders, Prime Minister Al-Sarraj and Field Marshal Haftar, agreeing to a ceasefire and committing to holding elections in 2018. However, commentators warned that provisos on the use of military intervention to counter terrorism might be misapplied and that fighting could erupt again. Amid the dangerous security vacuum, human rights organisations reiterated concerns about the proliferation of slavery and human trafficking. Ineffective governance and rule of law continued also to affect **Somalia**. The Somali communities in neighbouring countries also faced pressures, especially in Kenya where Somali militants (especially al-Shabab) committed atrocities, including against Christian targets.

In **Israel**, Messianic believers continued to face provocation and some localised attacks, especially by ultra-Orthodox Jewish groups. Peace talks remained at a standstill between Israel and **Palestine**. In July, the shooting of two Israeli police officers near the Al-Aqsa mosque threatened to trigger a major conflagration as tough new security measures were introduced, drawing national and international protest. At least two Palestinians were killed in subsequent disturbances. Israeli security then removed some of the more offensive restrictive measures. Jerusalem was again the centre of much regional and international attention when US President Trump announced in December that the US would recognise Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. This triggered widespread criticism, including from Middle Eastern Christian leaders, including Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran and Episcopalian church leaders in Jerusalem and the Middle East Council of Churches. Many warned that the announcement risked prolonged unrest not only in Palestine, but across the region.

In **Jordan** the comparative stability continued to be tested by economic and social tensions, some reflecting the ongoing strain of hosting large refugee communities. King Abdullah reiterated his pledge to be a protector of the Middle East’s Christians. Sectarian tensions continued in multi-confessional **Lebanon**, though the broad commitment to preserving intercommunal co-existence has largely been maintained. A new parliamentary election law was eventually agreed ahead of elections scheduled for May 2018, though only after the President had used his constitutional powers to suspend parliament, allowing more time for negotiations around the competing goals of achieving proportionality and protecting sectarian interests. In November, the sudden resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri, announced in Saudi Arabia, caused political shock-waves. However, within weeks he had returned to Lebanon and had retracted his resignation. The announcement was widely considered to have been prompted by Saudi Arabia as part of their increasing regional assertiveness, to counter the influence of Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Israel also expressed concerns about the threat posed by Hezbollah, prompting fears of a destabilising new Israeli operation against Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon.



There was some societal backlash against Christians in **Morocco** after a group of local believers publicly called on the Moroccan authorities to acknowledge, guarantee and respect the rights of local Christians. In November, King Mohammed delivered a message to a Rabat conference on the rights of religious minorities affirming that Morocco has no reason to deny religious minorities any of their rights. Routine pressures on Christians in **Mauritania** continued, especially the harassment of the small number of Christian converts.

Tunisia's continued vulnerability to terrorism led to the regular renewal of the state of emergency imposed in 2015, giving the authorities wide-ranging powers and prohibiting protests and many public gatherings. In September, President Essebsi announced significant plans to allow Tunisian women to marry non-Muslims and to provide equal inheritance rights to women, based on the constitutional obligation to "achieve full equality between women and men and to ensure equal opportunities for all responsibilities." Widely welcomed in progressive circles, the announcement drew sharp criticism from others, including the foremost Sunni seat of learning, al-Azhar in Cairo.

A major crisis erupted in June when **Qatar** was isolated by most other Gulf Cooperation Council members, with backing from Egypt. Diplomatic ties were severed and several demands made of Qatar, in particular relating to its alleged support for terrorist organisations (including the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas) and ties with Iran. Turkey and Iran gave support to Qatar, amid international calls for a diplomatic solution. By the end of the year international attention had diminished but no resolution was in sight. The **UAE** continued to promote tolerance as a 'fundamental value', including through the sponsorship of a high-level inter-faith conference and broad accommodation of non-Islamic worship among the very sizeable non-Muslim expatriate communities. In November the Abu Dhabi Judicial Department signed an agreement with church leaders, giving churches the authority to approve marriages, mediate divorces and, in due course, handle child custody issues, so expatriate Christians in Abu Dhabi will no longer have to use Sharia courts for these purposes. **Bahrain**'s oppression of political opposition (predominantly Shi'a) continued, and **Kuwait** and **Oman** also took steps to counter political dissent.



ANALYSIS OF TRENDS

Based on the cases that have been brought to MEC's attention during the year, what is the situation for Christians in the countries we serve? Are things improving or getting worse?

COUNTRIES



Egypt was the country in which MEC handled the most incidents (47) during 2017. The large number of incidents in part reflects the fact that Egypt has the largest indigenous Christian communities within the MENA region, and significant numbers of Christian converts. A key trend in 2017 was the continued targeting of Christians by extremist groups (claiming affiliation to Daesh). Security targets were also attacked as these groups sought to destabilise the al-Sisi regime. Another key trend was the sectarian tension, sometimes escalating to violent attack, based on claims that Christians were using unauthorised properties as places of worship. A factor underlying those tensions is the continuing legal obstacles that restrict the building and maintaining places of worship, despite improved legislation having been passed in 2016. Implementation of the new law has been deficient or slow, and there has been continued failure to bring perpetrators of sectarian attacks to justice.

Iran saw slightly fewer incidents (35) than in previous years, though the pressure (which is mainly from the state authorities) remains severe. The majority of cases addressed by MEC in 2017 involved imprisoned Christians or those awaiting court cases which have been protracted or left pending as a form of intimidation. Most cases involve converts to Christianity, though it is notable that in four cases indigenous Christians have been targeted and imprisoned. Also notable is the fact that more than half the cases handled during 2017 were continuing from 2016 or earlier years.



There was a significant rise in the number of incidents (30) in **Turkey**. Most of these involved government action against church institutions and leaders, or sectarian attacks against Christians or church properties. There is a clear link between these two – increased government interference and crackdown prompted a significant rise in anti-Christian rhetoric in the media (itself heavily controlled or influenced by the government), which then inspired action by extremist or community groups against Christian targets.

Following a fall in the number of incidents in **Iraq** in 2016, there was a rise in 2017 (from 19 to 31). There was renewed hope for Christian communities displaced by the atrocities of Daesh in 2014 as the 'liberation' of areas held by Daesh continued – though only modest numbers have returned to their towns due to the extent of damage to homes and infrastructure and because of lack of trust in security arrangements. During 2017, the threat to Christians from non-Daesh extremists grew – especially in areas where Shi'a militia have consolidat-

ed their control. Converts to Christianity have been especially vulnerable. Perpetrators of persecution have predominantly been extremist groups or family members rather than state authorities, which remain weak amid continuing sectarian tension.



The number of incidents recorded in **Syria** dropped significantly (14, down from 32 in 2016). However, the impact of the ongoing crisis on Christians has remained huge, with many having fled from areas controlled by extremists prior to 2017. Christian communities are now even more heavily concentrated in government-controlled areas which have tended to be more stable during 2017. A significant proportion of the incidents recorded by MEC were unverified or deemed not to be religious persecution targeting Christians. This reflects the fact that many challenges faced by Christians (and reported in some media as persecution targeting Christians) were in fact faced by many other communities.

Persecution of national churches and believers in **Algeria** increased (17 incidents, from 12 in 2016), almost always from the State authorities. The impasse continued in 2017 with the authorities failing to process applications by churches for entitlements under the 2006 legislation governing non-Muslim places of worship. During 2017 municipal authorities became more assertive in taking action against groups meeting for worship without official authorisation, sometimes using pretexts such as health and safety regulations. Several believers were arrested on accusations of proselytism.

The number of incidents (32) handled in **Jordan** remained high. The majority involved pressure against Christian believers from Muslim backgrounds, usually at the hands of family. In several cases, Christian believers had fled from Jordan to escape family threats, not confident that the Jordanian authorities would protect them. Evangelical churches, grateful for Jordan's relative protection and tolerance of indigenous Christians (provided activities that could be construed as proselytism are avoided), continued to request equivalent status to other churches.



Although there was a small number of incidents (8) in **Sudan**, it remains one of the countries of greatest concern in MEC's region. Almost all cases involved pressure from state authorities, with several inter-related cases involving imprisonment of church leaders, confiscation and destruction of church property, and high levels of other intimidation forcing church leaders to flee. The level of government surveillance means Sudanese Christians have been justifiably cautious about providing information on events in their country.

In **Saudi Arabia** most incidents (17) involved national Christian believers rather than expatriates. This reflects a low level of interference with expatriate and migrant worker fellowships, which in turn reflects a further weakening of the religious police. The challenges for national believers, should their faith become known, remain intense. The low number of incidents (8) in **Libya** reflects the very small number of Libyan believers and the fact that the majority of expatriate Christians have left the country due to the prevailing instability and violence. All confirmed cases in Libya involved severe action against individual local believers by State or community sources. Of the incidents (15) in **Israel**, a majority were perpetrated by ultra-Orthodox Jewish religious groups, especially against Messianic Jewish targets.

THEMES

A total of 11 confirmed cases of persecution handled in 2017 involved martyrdom. Of these, five were updates on cases involving murders of Christians in previous years (in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine and Turkey). The six cases from 2017 were all in Egypt and involved a total of 99 deaths. The large majority of those murdered were Christian-background believers, killed in extremist attacks against Christian targets. The highest death-tolls were in the Palm Sunday church attacks in Tanta and Alexandria (9 April 2017) in which 47 were killed, and the attack on a bus of travelling to a monastery (26 May 2017) in which 30 were killed. In much of the region Christian converts remain vulnerable to so-called ‘honour killings’ at the hands of family or community members, though no such cases were recorded by MEC in 2017.



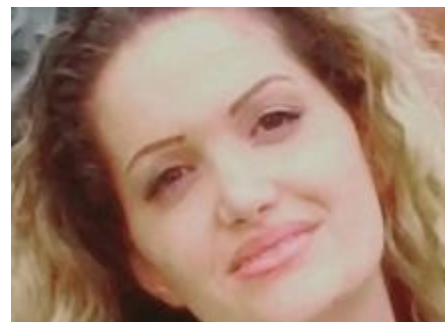
Our analysis of the source of persecution showed state authorities were the perpetrator in 50% of cases, a slight increase from previous years. Contributing significantly to this in 2017 were the large numbers of cases in Iran, Turkey and Algeria, the majority of which involved state authorities.

The family or community were responsible in 33% of cases, and extremist groups in 17%. This marks a continued decrease in cases involving extremists, possibly reflecting the weakening of Daesh but more so the extent to which Christians have left especially vulnerable areas in recent years (particularly Syrian and Iraqi Christians from areas controlled by Daesh or other Islamist groups, but also expatriate Christians from Libya and Yemen). Although the proportion of cases perpetrated by extremists fell, the severity of those cases was notable – including all cases handled involving martyrdom.



In 58% of cases the target was a Christian believer from a Muslim background. In 4% of cases the target was a Christian believer from another background (including Druze background and also Messianic believers). **The target of persecution was a national of the country in question in 84% of cases.** The target in 6% was a national of another MENA country, and in 10% was an expatriate Christian from outside the region. **In the majority of cases, the target of the persecution was an individual.** An individual was targeted in 68% of cases, and of those, 19% were church or ministry leaders. In the remaining cases, the target was usually a church or institution.

The proportion of cases in 2017 involving Christians fleeing from persecution was 30%. This represents an increase from 2016 (23%). MEC’s policy remains firmly to only encourage or assist relocation outside the MENA region as a last resort. It is important to note that only 11% of cases involved relocation out of the MENA region, with 13% involving relocation within the MENA region and 6% relocation within the home country. While it is encouraging that some have found local or regional relocation options, these options may not provide permanent solutions. Those who flee are predominantly Christian believers from Muslim backgrounds – either fleeing from family-based threats, or, especially in the case of Iranians, fleeing state oppression.



The most commonly recorded forms of persecution were legal discrimination (22% of cases), violent threats and general harassment (both 20%) and detention (19%). There is little evidence to suggest diminishing severity of persecution. Many cases continue to be complex with a range of pressures which may shift from less intense to more intense forms.

The proportion of cases involving either damage to or seizure of property was 18%. There have been fewer attacks on churches and Christian-owned properties in Syria and Iraq during 2017 than some recent years. However, in Sudan the government has continued its campaign of confiscation or destruction of church property; government pressures intensified in Algeria; community-based sectarian church property disputes featured prominently in Egypt; and Turkey and Israel continued to see several examples of vandalism of churches.

Some types of persecution continue to be barely reflected in cases handled by MEC. For example, discrimination in employment and education, especially for Christian converts, are known to be challenges for Christians in the MENA region, and such issues are often combined with or reflect ostracism by family. It is common for discrimination to go unchallenged, either because there is no means for redress or because to make an official complaint or to initiate legal challenge would be intimidating and costly. MEC is keen to encourage and provide support to those who are prepared to take a stand against injustice and pursue challenges to their conclusion.



NUMBERS



The total number of incidents handled dropped to 297 (compared to 342 in 2016 and 370 in 2015). A total of 33 incidents were unverified or were confirmed not to have been cases of religious persecution. Of the remaining 264 confirmed cases of persecution, 18 were long-standing cases which MEC continued to monitor but in which there were no substantive developments in 2017. The number of active religious persecution cases in 2017 was therefore 246 (285 in 2016; 309 in 2015).

Although the total number of cases dropped, **it should not be deduced that the persecution of Christians was less severe in 2017.** MEC is aware that these listings of incidents must be regarded as only very partial, due to the secrecy in which many Christians (especially converts) operate, the challenge of obtaining information from many parts of the region, and issues of capacity and methodology.

There was a significant increase in the proportion of cases in which MEC has had direct input. The number of cases in which MEC provided some form of assistance was 176, or 72% of the 246 active cases (157, 53% in 2016; 156, 50% in 2015). These are the cases in which MEC provided consultancy, mobilised prayer, initiated advocacy, or provided financial or other practical support. This significant increase reflects a more selective methodology, with MEC's capacity being more effectively channelled toward cases in which such input is appropriate and feasible.



A majority of cases (162, 61%) handled in 2017 remained ongoing at the end of the year. This continued a trend from previous years and reflects the protracted nature of many cases of persecution. Examples include prisoners serving long sentences, those awaiting delayed or repeatedly postponed court proceedings, those who have fled to other countries and have had no option but to resort to the slow refugee or asylum systems, and those who may have withstood an initial set of pressures but anticipate further challenges ahead.

'Success' remains hard to measure. In MEC's analysis of cases, an assessment is made of whether the human rights violation was reversed or partially reversed (positive outcomes) or whether the violation remains (negative outcome). For some cases the violation is 'irreversible' (such as those involving death) and for cases that are ongoing the outcome is considered 'pending'. In 2017, of the 94 cases which were neither 'pending' nor 'irreversible', 33% showed positive outcomes and 67% showed negative outcomes. It is important to note that this assessment applies specifically to the human rights violation. In some cases, a positive development happens but the violation still stands – for example, a prisoner may be released from prison having served a sentence. It is important to note that even where violations remain or cannot be reversed, MEC input can have an important impact on the individuals involved and their wider communities – for example, many have attested to the strength and encouragement that prayer support and other forms of practical assistance have provided.

ASSESSMENT OF IMPACT

What difference to the Christian (and non-Christian) communities of the MENA region does MEC make?

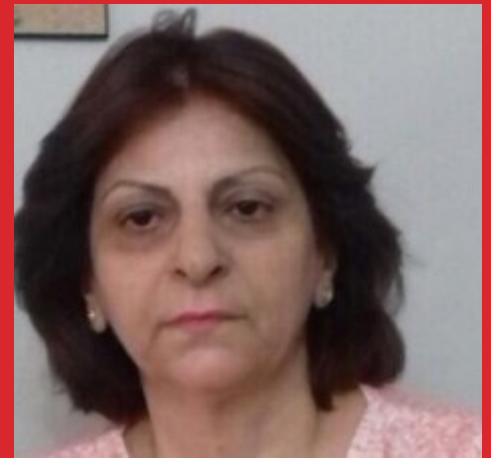
MEC is available for Christian individuals, communities and organisations facing pressure because of their faith. Christians in the region (nationals and expatriates) express gratitude for the reassurance MEC's presence brings. The wife of an imprisoned Middle East Christian said: **'I'm really thankful for all MEC's help, MEC has been a real rock in this storm.'** Christians in the region are encouraged to know that informed and trustworthy expertise is available should they (or those they are working amongst) need it. A Christian forced to flee his home said: **'I thank God for blessing me with MEC, because MEC's assistance has given me great courage.'**

MENA Christians play a central role in the processes MEC uses in responding to claims of persecution. Verification of claims is crucial and is typically undertaken through liaison with a network of local church and ministry leaders. If and when claims are verified, any support action is discussed with those closely involved in the situation (typically the victim, their spiritual leader and, where appropriate, their family), and only proceeds with their authorisation. This approach is intended to respect and empower MENA Christians.

Consultancy provided by MEC enhances the ability of those facing pressures to handle their plight wisely, reducing immediate adverse consequences and facilitating constructive local responses. When appropriate, specific forms of practical assistance, including financial support, enable Christians to maintain dignity and a livelihood during and following a crisis, leading to improved situations.

MEC's seminar and training programme aims to build the capability of MENA Christians to prepare well for persecution, to mitigate risks of adverse reactions when possible and to react wisely when persecution does come. It also equips MENA Christians to be proactive in asserting and defending their right to religious freedom.

MEC affirms the power and value of facilitating informed prayer. In secular terms this can be viewed as the suffering community knowing their plight is known to people who will identify with a key aspect of how they understand their identity. Such knowledge increases their ability and resolve to endure their suffering. Testimony to this is provided by cases where prayer is the only action requested by victims (declining publicity or advocacy), and reports from victims and those supporting them that they attribute changes to their situations to the prayers of others. It is frequently the case that victims, and those supporting them, express appreciation for the prayers of Christians around the world. And Christians around the world



Iran

In June 2017, Shamiran Issavi, wife of Pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz, was summoned by the authorities to Evin Detention Centre, Branch 3 of the Revolutionary Court, and charged with "participating in foreign seminars" and "acting against Iranian national security" as a church member. She was released after one day on bail of 100 million Tomans (approximately US\$30,000). Shamiran was called to attend a hearing on 31 July 2017 in Tehran at Branch 26 of the Islamic Revolutionary Court. The judge assigned to the case is Mr Ahmadzadeh. However, her hearing was postponed until Monday, 21 August 2017 when her lawyer requested another postponement in order to gather more information and to better prepare for the hearing. A hearing that took place on 12 December 2017 in Tehran, at which her lawyer represented her. The result of the hearing is unknown.

MEC responded by submitting advocacy requests to our advocacy network and offering consultation help. We have also been involved in a related case involving Pastor Victor and others.

express gratitude for the opportunity MEC provides for them to provide support and encouragement in this way.

Within the MENA region, the impact of MEC's work reaches beyond the Christian communities. As MEC discusses with national Christians how to engage with constitutional and other legal review processes, the focus is on the protection and enhancement of religious freedoms for the benefit of all citizens. The consistent addressing of specific human rights violations in a country contributes over time to effecting change in underlying structural issues.

Members of indigenous Christian communities, on whose behalf MEC advocates, note that the preservation of their communities is vital not just for their own benefit but also for the benefit of the wider societies of which their communities are a part. Christians are part of the fabric of those societies, and the protection and consolidation of pluralism can be important as a bulwark against increased radicalism.



Israel

On 31 August 2017, Israeli news portal Arutz 7 reported that a crowd of Orthodox Jews had gathered around a Messianic congregation in Arad (Hasdey Yeshua), with the participation of the mayor. It was later shown, however, to be less sensational. According to members of the congregation, 20-30 Jews belonging to the Gur Hasidim gathered outside the warehouse facility where they were meeting and cursed and proclaimed hostile slogans, with little effect. The corrected version of events was later published by Israel Today. Hostile action of the Gur Hasidim continued, and the congregation leaders requested prayer.

MEC responded by mobilising our prayer networks.

ASSISTING INDIVIDUALS



Egypt

On 7 April 2015 police detained a teacher in al-Nassariya village in Beni Mazar after Muslims accused him of blasphemy. He had filmed five of his students who were parodying Daesh. On 27 December 2015 the teacher was sentenced to 3 years in prison. On 25 February 2016, the four students were each sentenced to five years in prison. The judge ruled that they could not await the outcome of any appeal but should be detained right away. In April 2016 the boys managed to leave Egypt, moving to a European country on 1 September 2016. The teacher left Egypt in mid-September for another Arab country. On 26 July 2017, he left for Canada and on 28 July his wife and sons left Egypt to join him in Canada.

MEC provided support through its prayer and advocacy networks, as well as finding a European country that would accept the students. They and the teacher also received financial assistance.

The Body of Christ is made up of individuals who have come together to worship and fellowship. We have a duty to assist other members of the Body who are in need, if assistance is in our power. MEC provides support to the church in the MENA region by assisting victims of persecution when requested by them or authorized by Christian leaders.

Each request for assistance is examined by our regional managers who seek verification through local partners. If an incident is confirmed as a case of persecution due to the victim's Christian faith or activities, MEC works with local partners to provide appropriate support.

MEC assists victims of persecution by: offering encouragement and informed, trustworthy expertise; mobilising worldwide prayer, in open or confidential networks (in 2017 prayer was requested in 81 cases and 112 prayer requests were issued, 74 to open networks and 38 to confidential networks); initiating political advocacy on behalf of victims of persecution (in 2017 there were 24 cases which involved advocacy); and providing practical and financial support (in 2017 there were: 137 incidents with consultancy provided; 78 cases which involved relocation efforts; and 22 cases where donor support was provided to cover lawyers' fees, assist the families of those detained or killed for their faith, and cover costs associated with relocation - a total of £98,310 or approximately \$138,000 US was dispensed).

CASE ANALYSIS

CASES AND COUNTRIES

Incidents & Cases	2017	2016	2015
Total incidents	297	342	370
Verified as not religious persecution	21	25	14
Unverified	12	17	19
Total religious persecution cases	264	300	337
Ongoing, no change during year	18	15	28
Active religious persecution cases in year	246	285	309
Religious persecution cases in 2017 with active MEC involvement	176 (72%)	157 (53%)	156 (50%)

Countries (all 297 incidents)					
Egypt	47	Syria	14	Kuwait	2
Iran	35	Yemen	12	Mauritania	2
Jordan	32	Libya	8	Tunisia	2
Iraq	31	Morocco	8	Bahrain	1
Turkey	30	Sudan	8	Oman	1
Algeria	17	Lebanon	5	Qatar	1
Saudi Arabia	17	Palestine	5	UAE	1
Israel	15	Somalia	3	N. Cyprus	0

MEC INVOLVEMENT

(246 active cases in 2017; some cases have more than one type of involvement)

Active involvement			Passive involvement		
Total	176	(72%)	Total	70	(28%)
<i>of which</i>			<i>of which</i>		
Consultancy	137	(78%)	Watching brief	21	(30%)
Prayer	81	(48%)	Local action	3	(4%)
Advocacy	24	(14%)	No appropriate action	24	(34%)
Funding	22	(13%)	No authorisation	24	(34%)

VICTIMS OF PERSECUTION

(264 cases, including those monitored during 2017)

Target		Nationality		Background	
Individual	146 (55%)	National	221 (84%)	BCB	101 (38%)
Leader	34 (13%)	Other MENA	16 (6%)	BMB	153 (58%)
Church/Org	80 (30%)	Expat	27 (10%)	Other Convert	10 (4%)
Mix	4 (2%)				

SOURCE AND TYPE OF PERSECUTION

(264 cases, including those monitored during 2017)

Perpetrator	
State	131 (50%)
Extremist	46 (17%)
Community	31 (12%)
Family	56 (21%)

Type (some cases involved more than one type)			
Death	11 (4%)	Legal discrimination	58 (22%)
Detention	51 (19%)	Child Custody	5 (2%)
Abduction	9 (3%)	Property damage	26 (10%)
Physical harm	34 (13%)	Property seizure	30 (11%)
Violent threats	54 (20%)	Event disruption	12 (5%)
General harassment	53 (20%)	Deported / denied entry	18 (7%)
Forced conversion	8 (3%)	Employment	8 (3%)
Forced to flee	61 (23%)	Education	3 (1%)

CHALLENGING INJUSTICE

When authorized by those involved, MEC challenges unjust laws, policies and attitudes. MEC undertakes research-based advocacy on legal and structural issues that underlie persecution, campaigns for the reinstatement of civil rights to converts from Islam, and addresses unhealthy responses to persecution such as hasty relocation to the West.

MEC's advocacy network includes a wide variety of contacts such as members of parliament and government officials in North America, Europe, Australasia, the Far East, South and Central America, as well as officials within the different institutions of the UN and EU. We have regular contact with them, helping lawmakers stay abreast of developments and providing suggestions as to how they may support those facing persecution.

COLLABORATIVE INITIATIVES

MEC expends a considerable amount of time working with others in a variety of ways. Some of these activities take only a little of MEC's time, however some others require quite a significant investment of our resources.

MEC has worked with Open Doors as a partner in their advocacy project '**Hope for the Middle East**', which is carried out in support of the Christian communities throughout the Middle East and North Africa region. In December 2017 one of the initiatives, a petition calling for Christians in Iraq and Syria to have the right to equal citizenship, dignified living conditions and a prominent role in reconciling and rebuilding society was presented to high level UN officials, to UK Prime Minister Theresa May and to the Vice President of the USA Mike Pence, amongst others. The petition was supported by more than 800,000 people in 143 countries. This seven-year campaign, which was launched in 2015, includes a wide range of activities which are designed to provide support, encouragement and advocacy for the church in the region, with an initial focus on the two countries of Syria and Iraq. This advocacy project is organised in four main sections: 'Listen', 'Educate', 'Mobilise' and 'Influence'. MEC leads the 'Listen' activities of the project, and is also contributing to the 'Influence' activities.

MEC has continued collaboration with a number of groups advocating for **Christians in Iran**. Lists of Christian prisoners are shared with key advocacy contacts who are focused on the human rights situation in Iran. In addition, MEC is a founder member of the Religious Liberty Partnership.



Algeria

In October 2017, police raided a bookshop and a Church in Ain Turk near Oran, accusing the owner of the bookshop and the Church of illegally printing Bibles and evangelistic literature. They confiscated books and equipment but returned them when no proof of the allegations was found. Despite that, the police commissioner issued and implemented a written closure order on 9 November for both the church and the bookshop. The order, which wrongly identifies the bookshop owner as the pastor of the church, repeated the earlier accusations and also alleges that a private car is used to distribute illegal Christian material. The closure order also claims the Ain Turk church is illegal, despite its affiliation with the officially recognized EPA.

MEC mobilized its prayer network in support of this church and bookshop. Algerian church leaders are reporting a climate of renewed intolerance in the country and have been working with MEC to raise awareness of the challenges faced by Christians in that country.

BUILDING SUPPORT NETWORKS



MEC's support networks are twofold: those in the MENA region who assist us directly with our work and those around the world who support our work.

MEC has multiple contacts in every country in the MENA region, including national church leaders in all countries where there is a legally recognised church, other national believers including those from non-Christian backgrounds, expatriate Christians, lawyers, and human rights. It is to them we turn to find out about incidents, to verify information, to evaluate possible responses and then very often to be a part of the response effort.



Outside of MENA are those who provide support through financial means, political advocacy, refugee support, through expert resources and through prayer.

At the time of writing (February 2018) the numbers of recipients in MEC's distribution networks are:

Private prayer (codes 1-2)	798
Public prayer (codes 3-4)	2,440
Press releases	907
Advocacy requests	580

Many recipients use public prayer requests in their own networks, expanding distribution to many more prayer partners.

MEC includes distribution guidelines at the head of all advocacy and prayer requests. These identify the information as either **confidential** (Code 1), **restricted** (Code 2), **open** (Code 3) or **public** (Code 4).



ADVOCACY REQUESTS

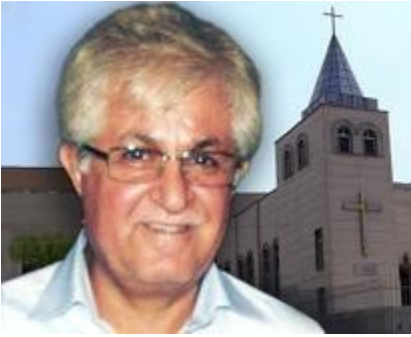
MEC makes targeted use of advocacy contacts. While some requests are sent to our entire network, many are sent to only selected individuals assessed as having greatest potential for effective engagement and influence for a particular case.

MEC's advocacy requests are translated into Spanish and French, for European and Latin American contacts.

PRESS RELEASES

MEC issued one press release in 2017. However, information from public prayer requests (codes 3 and 4) regularly appeared in Christian media.

PRAYER REQUESTS



A total of 112 prayer requests were issued in 2017: 27 with circulation code 1; 11 with code 2; and 74 with code 3.

All requests were sent to the private network and 74 to the more open network (which were also posted on MEC's web site and social media).

MEC's prayer requests are translated into Korean, Portuguese, Spanish and Mandarin for public requests. Some recipients share MEC's prayer requests in wider prayer networks.

MEC ONLINE

meconcern.org

MEC's website received 28,000 page views in 2017. Posts include links to prayer requests on the web site, and links to media reports relating to the religious freedom of Christians in the region. MEC's website includes background information in nine languages.

[@MiddleEConcern](https://twitter.com/MiddleEConcern)

In early 2018 MEC had 2,329 followers on Twitter , compared to 2,200 in early 2017.

[/middleeastconcern](https://www.facebook.com/middleeastconcern)

In early 2018 MEC had 697 followers on Facebook, compared to 400 in early 2017.



TRAINING & EQUIPPING

MEC provides support to Christians in the Middle East and North Africa region by equipping them to face persecution when it is requested or authorised to do so by Christian leaders.

MEC is committed to encouraging and empowering the church in the Middle East and North Africa to become an agent for change in societies and communities, not only for Christians but for all who suffer injustice.

MEC does this with seminars on: Biblical perspectives on persecution; standing up for rights and religious freedom; crisis management; handling arrest, detention and interrogation; prevention of and preparation for persecution, and assistance to victims; and refugee processes).

Content of the seminars is tailored to each audience. Made to order seminars are provided on request, covering Biblical, legal and practical perspectives on persecution, as well as historical background and current regional trends.

EXAMPLES

Legal training course: In this seminar MEC aims to impart a commitment to human rights and human rights advocacy, with necessary knowledge and skills. Topics can include: legal knowledge (international and regional human rights law); mechanisms at a local, regional and international level that can be used to challenge human rights violations, the concept of human rights advocacy, and the advocacy process. In addition to imparting knowledge, the seminars provide training in different skills necessary for human rights work, including: problem analysis; stakeholder analysis and advocacy targets; coalition building; messaging; and advocacy methods and activities. The course includes lectures, group discussions, and individual and group exercises.

Seminar on Refugee Status Determination interviews: This course was created in response to a study that found suicide rates among Sudanese asylum seekers in Egypt to be unusually high. Research by the International Catholic Migration Commission determined a contributing factor was stress on refugees undergoing the asylum and resettlement process. Proper preparation for and understanding of the process reduces the stress level felt by the individuals. A critical point is the Refugee Status Determination interview, which is part of the verification process to confirm that the asylum seeker is indeed a refugee as defined by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Many people make false claims about persecution to bolster their case, and, given that, interviewers may reject valid claims if they detect inconsistencies or false statements. This seminar prepares asylum seekers for the interview, helping them understand the process and the need for clarity and truth in their stories. This workshop-based presentation lasts three to four hours, depending on whether translation is



required. Asylum seekers are informed about the process and aims of the interview from the interviewer's perspective. It includes advice on preparation and which documents to bring to provide evidence. A key goal is getting asylum seekers to focus on main points the interviewer will seek to determine their status. Another part of the workshop is a role play where asylum seekers play the parts of interviewer and interviewee, asking sample questions supplied by the UN Refugee Agency. After the workshop, asylum seekers with genuine claims as a result of persecution for religious beliefs should have confidence to face the interview knowing what to expect and feeling prepared to answer questions in a way that will help their application.

TEACH-LEARN INITIATIVE

MEC developed this ten-module course entitled 'The Christian and Persecution' as part of the TEACH-LEARN online theological and leadership training initiative of the Overseas Council, the Middle East Association of Theological Education and the Middle East Christian satellite TV network SAT-7. Covering a wide range of theological, legal and pastoral topics, the course seeks to equip Middle Eastern Christian leaders with an understanding of the complexity of challenges faced by Christians in today's world, to enable them to minister in persecuted settings more effectively and to supply them with theological and practical tools they can use in their ministry. Available on an online learning platform since 2015, the course material is also available on the MEC web site.



STAFF & FINANCE

STAFF

At the end of 2017 there were eleven people in the MEC staff team, including two who joined during the year. There was one departure during the year.

In 2017 the members of the MEC staff team met with Christians from (or working in) all 24 of the countries and territories in MEC's region. They visited 13 of the 24 countries and territories in the Middle East and North Africa region. They attended 19 conferences/forums focusing on one or more countries in the Middle East and North Africa region either as presenters or to maintain and develop support networks. MEC staff also visited 21 countries outside the Middle East and North Africa region specifically to develop MEC's support networks.

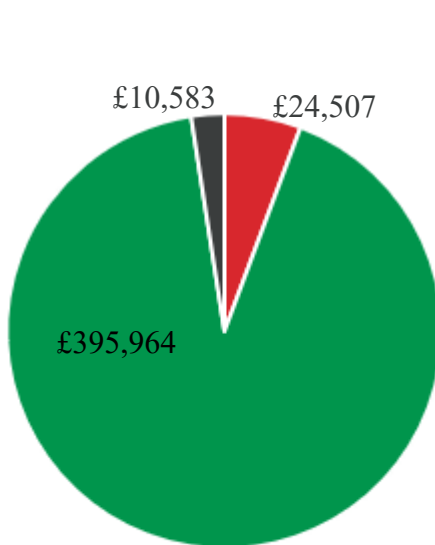
FINANCE

MEC is profoundly grateful to its members and other donors and partners who provide so generously, and to those serving on MEC's governance board who help MEC to maintain the high standards of accountability and stewardship to which we are committed.

Figures are presented in GBP. MEC policies on financial resilience and financial reserves in are line with the guidelines of the UK Charity Commission.

Income

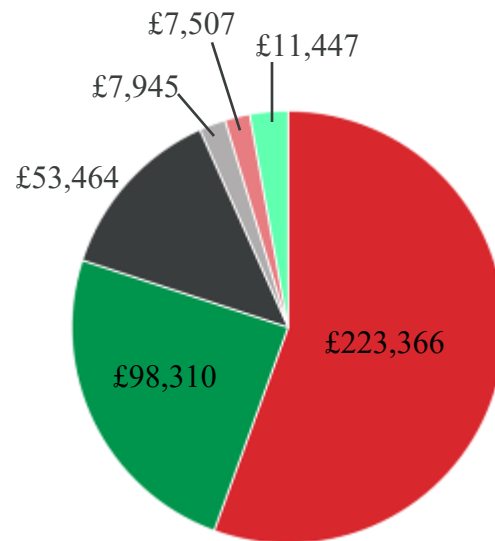
Total: £431,054



- Membership dues
- Institutional donors
- Individual donations

Expenditure

Total: £402,039



- Salaries
- Financial support to victims of persecution
- Travel
- Communications & publicity
- Office & equipment
- Other



MIDDLE
EAST
CONCERN

MEC



photo credits at: meconcern.org/credits

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 [@MiddleEConcern](https://twitter.com/MiddleEConcern)

 [/middleeastconcern](https://facebook.com/middleeastconcern)