



# **ANNUAL REPORT**

## **2018**

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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.*

Middle East Concern (MEC) exists to support those in the Middle East and North Africa who are marginalised, discriminated against or persecuted for being or becoming Christians.

A few, like American pastor Andrew Brunson, caught in a geo-political power struggle between the United States and Turkey, become well known. Details of such cases spread through traditional and social media. Most though, attract little to no attention from the world's press. Middle East Concern seeks to be their advocate and their voice.

Our work largely takes place outside the spotlight. With those inside the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, we work to investigate, support, publicize, encourage, train, advocate and sometimes relocate. Our organization is small, our impact great.

For MEC to have that impact requires a team, both staff and members, who dedicate themselves to speaking for those who have requested our assistance, those who may otherwise have no voice.

MEC dealt with 297 active religious persecution cases in 2018. At times, depending on the country, it seems the situation is worsening or getting better. The reality is that even one case would be too many. We dream of a day of true freedom of religion and belief for all in the MENA region. Sadly, that day has not yet come.

This report summarizes MEC's work in 2018. It provides more than just facts and figures. It is a testament to the enduring faith and presence of the Christian communities throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

***Daniel Hoffman***  
***Executive Director***

# REGIONAL OVERVIEW

For Christians in the 24 countries of Middle East and North Africa served by MEC, 2018 was once again a challenging year.

In **Turkey**, President Erdogan and his AKP Party consolidated their grip on power following victory in snap Presidential and Parliamentary elections held in June. The profile of the detention of US pastor Andrew Brunson, imprisoned since October 2016, heightened with a conviction on farcical charges, prompting US-imposed political sanctions which exacerbated Turkey's economic woes. Following Brunson's release on 12 October, relations with European and North American countries remained strained, reflecting those countries' unease about domestic and regional agendas. A more hostile atmosphere towards Turkish Christians was discernible, particularly in local media.

The introduction of US sanctions on **Iran**, following the US's unilateral withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal, exacerbated dire economic conditions and prompted social tensions to boil over into protests. While protests focused on the economy and some human rights issues, the legitimacy of the regime has not been seriously challenged. Pressure on Iran's Christian communities continued, with a number of Christians arrested in previous years receiving prison sentences and with around 150 arrests, primarily of converts from Islam to Christianity, in the run up to Christmas.

Presidential elections in **Egypt** saw President al-Sisi receive a fresh mandate. Despite government assurances of security, together with gestures such as the rapid construction of a Cathedral in the new administrative capital and the bringing to justice of perpetrators of anti-Christian atrocities, sectarian violence has continued. In November, another deadly bus attack in Minya province, claimed by Islamists, left seven monastery pilgrims dead. Much of the more routine sectarian tension was sparked by rumours or disputes about unlicensed places of worship. The authorities' flawed 'reconciliation' approach to calming tensions typically deprives Christian victims of justice; meanwhile, the implementation of the registration and authorisation of churches under new regulations is excruciatingly slow.

The slowly increasing return of Christian communities to the Nineveh Plains region of **Iraq** brought some encouragement - though Christians and other religious minorities remain vulnerable, demonstrated by the murders of five Christians and Mandeans in Baghdad in February and March. The challenge of maintaining security and social cohesion across the country remained acute, particularly at the disputed May parliamentary elections. Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and his allies made significant gains in a process which left Christian parties aggrieved, perceiving that the quota of five seats for Christians had effectively been hijacked by candidates who placed other agendas ahead of the interests of Iraq's beleaguered Christians. Although political deadlock was broken with the appointment of a government and president, ongoing challenges remain daunting - including the massive reconstruction needs in areas previously held by IS, and continuing tensions over the status of the Kurdish Region.

The Assad government consolidated its control of much of **Syria** during the year and sought to kick-start reconstruction. Following intensive fighting to 'liberate' Eastern Ghouta early in the year, Idlib has become the principal remaining opposition stronghold. A major offensive by Turkish forces and allied militias in January in Afrin led to mass displacement of Kurds, prompting appeals for assistance by Kurdish Christians. Though Daesh was severely weakened militarily and territorially, a massacre and abductions in the predominantly Druze area of Sweideh in late July provided a reminder of their lingering threat. In the late summer, tensions flared for Christian communities in the Kurdish-controlled Hassake area in a dispute about the imposition of a Kurdish school curriculum. President Assad, with support of many church leaders, has increasingly provided assurances of a 'business-as-normal' context to which refugees and IDPs can return. However, there have only been small trickles of returnees.

The brutal conflict and humanitarian crisis in **Yemen** continued, as the Saudi-led coalition fights on behalf of the Hadi government against Houthi forces who control much of the North of the country. The UN Humanitarian Coordinator warned that “the worst famine in a century” was unfolding, as both sides faced accusations of war crimes, including the bombing of civilian areas and the restricting of access to aid. During the year, the coalition’s focus shifted to efforts to capture the strategic port city from Houthi control. Tensions also simmered in the South between the Hadi Government and southern separatists, while extremist groups have thrived within the significant security vacuums. Within such harsh conditions, the fledgling networks of Yemeni house churches have seen continued expansion.

In a welcome move, a court in **Sudan** ruled in favour of the Sudan Church of Christ in the latest development in a dispute between the Church Council and a government-appointed committee which purports to control the church. However, a similar and long-running dispute involving the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church continued. Widespread popular protests, prompted by deteriorating economic condition, which erupted late in the year and are ongoing, were met by violent responses from the authorities.

**Somalia** continued to be gripped by instability, violence and corruption. Territorial disputes flared up again in between Somaliland and Puntland, and Somali security forces struggled to contain the extremist threat of al-Shabaab, straining relations between Mogadishu and several federal states. Al-Shabaab's reach extended beyond Somalia to nearby refugee communities, especially in Kenya, where several deadly attacks targeted Christians.

In **Jordan**, significant social unrest erupted at the end of May in response to austerity measures aimed at easing Jordan's deepening economic crisis, prompting the replacement of the prime minister. Resentment towards refugee communities grew, with increased calls for refugee returns to Syria and Iraq to be accelerated. Indigenous Christians remain grateful for the degree of acceptance and freedom they enjoy, though Evangelical churches do not have



equivalent status to those of other traditions. Societal pressure against converts to Christianity remains intense.

In **Lebanon**, Hezbollah made significant gains in May elections under a new proportional system, but political impasse returned lack of agreement on the formation of the new government until early 2019. As in Jordan, resentment towards refugee communities grew, with political momentum for an acceleration of refugee returns to Syria (particularly from within pro-Syrian political circles, with support from many church leaders), in spite of UNHCR warnings that reasonable assurances of safety in Syria cannot yet be provided.

Tensions in **Israel** and **Palestine** reflected or were fuelled by US policy in the region. Many traditional church leaders joined those decrying the opening of the US Embassy in Jerusalem, which took place on the 70th anniversary of the declaration of the State of Israel. That anniversary was also marked by large Palestinian protests in Gaza which were forcibly quelled by Israeli security. A decision by the mayor of Jerusalem to impose taxes on church properties, including a demand for a huge back-payment unpaid taxes, led to an unprecedented move by the churches to temporarily close the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to visitors. Churches insist that their traditional tax-exempt status should be maintained and respected.

In **Algeria**, the government's campaign to restrict churches by refusing to provide recognition in accordance with the provisions of the 2006 decree on non-Islamic worship, intensified with several churches closed. An inspections committee, ostensibly checking church premises for compliance with health and safety regulations, is being used to force closures has sought to and to undermine the legally recognised association of Evangelical churches (l'Eglise Protestante d'Algérie). International advocacy by MEC and others highlighted the injustice of these actions and appealed for increased religious freedom.

Political crisis and violent conflict continued in **Libya** between the internationally-recognised Government of National Accord, based in Tripoli, and Libyan National Army forces based in eastern Libya government. Tripoli declared a state of emergency, despite concessions by rival government leader General Haftar who returned control of oil ports. A UN-brokered process to hold elections has seen repeated delays.

Economic measures aimed to tackle **Tunisia's** international debt have bred discontent. Measures were taken to increase government oversight of civil society organisations also prompted concern, though significant enhancements to women's rights were welcomed.

In **Morocco**, the authorities were criticised by human rights organisations for harsh responses to public discontent prompted by economic conditions and the response to a mining disaster. Some Moroccan Christians adopted a high-profile stance in calling for greater recognition and religious freedom, while others preferred less provocative approaches.

In April, **Mauritania's** National Assembly approved amendments to the Criminal Code to make the death penalty mandatory for anyone convicted of blasphemy or "sacrilegious acts,"





removing the possibility for a more lenient sentence to be imposed if a convicted apostate shows penitence.

The international community showed increasing scepticism about the social and cultural liberalisation agenda in **Saudi Arabia** accompanying the Crown Prince's economic diversification programme. Significant gains, most prominently the move in June to allow women to drive, were undermined by continued crackdown on dissent, with the brutal murder in October in Istanbul of former government insider Jamal Khashoggi casting the darkest shadow. Aggressive foreign policy initiatives including the protracted war in Yemen and the conflagration with Qatar have also raised questions about the Crown Prince's ambitions and tactics. Earlier in the year, the Crown Prince met various religious leaders including the Coptic Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury, though few believe such engagement will lead imminently to greater religious freedoms.

The stand-off between **Qatar** and Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain (among others) continued, leading Qatar to strengthen relations with Turkey and Iran. Human rights organisations cautiously welcomed some improvements to workers' rights, while urging deeper reforms. The foundation stone for a Maronite church was laid at the Religious Complex by the Patriarch during an official visit in April.

**Bahrain** continued to assert its commitment to religious tolerance: in June, construction of the Catholic Cathedral in Awali was initiated and in November the King Hamad Chair in Inter-faith Dialogue and Peaceful Co-existence was inaugurated at Sapienza University, Rome. However, the Shi'a majority continued to face significant religious and political repression.

**The UAE** also continued to position itself as a beacon of tolerance and inter-religious harmony. The Dubai government continued discussions with church leaders about the regulation of church fellowships meeting outside designated church compounds which have inadequate capacity to cater for the very sizeable expatriate Christian communities.

In **Kuwait**, lack of capacity on designated compounds was also a significant pressure for churches. A stand-off between Kuwait and the Philippines was resolved through Kuwait's introduction of enhanced protections for migrant workers from the Philippines.

**Oman's** traditional position of neutrality in regional affairs was increasingly tested as the GCC rift continued and as tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran intensified.

Church leaders welcomed an announcement by the Directorate of Religious Affairs in **North-Cyprus** that church objects in museums belong to the Orthodox church and should be returned to the church.



# ANALYSIS OF TRENDS

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

## COUNTRIES

**Iran** saw a significant increase in incidents from the previous year (from 35 to 51) than in previous years. The majority of cases addressed by MEC involve 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 several cases have involved the targeting and imprisonment of indigenous Christians. Although there was a spike of new arrests in late 2018, many cases are long-standing, continuing from earlier years.

The large number of incidents in **Egypt** (45) in part reflects the fact that Egypt has the largest indigenous Christian communities within the MENA region, and significant numbers of converts. A key trend in 2018 was sectarian tension, sometimes escalating to violent attack, based on claims that Christians were using unauthorised properties as places of worship. Slow progress is being made in implementing the improved regulations passed in 2016. However, even assessment inspections of currently unlicensed properties have served to stoke opposition by drawing attention to church activities. 2018 also saw some further targeting of Christians by extremist groups (often claiming affiliation to Daesh). Security targets have also been attacked as these groups have sought to destabilise the al-Sisi regime.



There was a doubling of incidents recorded in **Syria** in 2018, following a significant drop in 2017 (from 14 to 28). Christian communities are now even more heavily concentrated in government-controlled areas which have tended to be more stable during 2017 and 2018. This rise reflected various dynamics, including conflict in Afrin, the flare-up of tensions between Syriac communities and the Kurdish administration in Hassake Province, community hostility to converts (including in refugee communities), and reports of growing hostility towards Evangelicals from traditional churches. Many challenges faced by Christians (and reported in some media as persecution targeting Christians) were in fact faced by many other communities and were not specifically targeting Christians.

The number of incidents in **Palestine** increased in 2018 (from 5 to 12). Approximately half of these reflected legal or societal challenges faced by churches, and half reflected family hostility towards converts.

**Lebanon** also saw a significant increase (from 5 to 11). The majority of these cases involved converts from other countries, typically within refugee communities, who were facing significant threats from sources within Lebanon. (The cases of those who have fled to Lebanon due to



pressures in other countries are recorded under those other countries). The increase in pressures faced by refugees within Lebanon may reflect growing numbers of converts, increasing desperation within refugee communities and/or increasing resentment among host communities.

Although there has been a comparatively small number of incidents in **Sudan** (7), it remains one of the countries of greatest concern in MEC's region. The level of government surveillance means Sudanese Christians have been justifiably cautious about providing information on events in their country. Most cases were long-standing situations of pressure by state authorities involving confiscation and destruction of church property, and other intimidatory tactics. The arrests of 10 converts in October demonstrated the vulnerability of those who leave Islam.



Persecution of national churches and believers in **Algeria** remained high (18 incidents), primarily from state authorities. The authorities still failed to process applications by churches for entitlements under the 2006 legislation governing non-Muslim places of worship. During 2018, campaigns against churches by municipal authorities were stepped up, sometimes using pretexts such as health and safety regulations.

The high number of incidents (28) in **Turkey** was maintained, many involving government action against church institutions and leaders, or sectarian attacks against Christians or church properties. Increased government interference and crackdown, especially focused on the high-profile case of Andrew Brunson, 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.

The high number of incidents in **Iraq** was maintained (31 in 2017, 34 in 2018). Only modest numbers have returned to towns from which Christian communities fled in 2014, reflecting not just the extent of damage to infrastructure but also a continuing lack of trust in security arrangements. During 2018 this was compounded by a growing sense of marginalisation, including through alleged 'demographic engineering' programmes which included the appropriation of Christian-owned properties and land. There has also been a continuing threat to Christians from extremists, especially in areas where Shi'a militia have consolidated their control, with converts to Christianity especially vulnerable.



A high number of incidents (34) was handled in **Jordan** once again, the majority involving pressure against converts from Islam, usually at the hands of family members. In several cases, believers had fled from Jordan to escape family threats, not confident that the authorities would protect them. Some Evangelical leaders noted increased pressures, reflecting the authorities' unease about any activities that could be construed as proselytism, and there was growing frustration at the authorities' failure to grant Evangelicals equivalent status to other churches - though Christian communities continue to be grateful for the relative protection and peaceful coexistence they enjoy in Jordan.

In **Saudi Arabia** most incidents (17) involved national believers (converts from Islam) rather than expatriates, reflecting a low level of interference with expatriate and migrant worker fellowships. The challenges for national believers, should their faith become known, remain intense. The low number of incidents (4) in **Libya** reflects the very small number of Libyan believers and the fact the majority of expatriate Christians have left the country due to the continuing lack of security. Of the incidents (15) in **Israel**, the majority were perpetrated by ultra-Orthodox Jewish religious groups, especially against Messianic Jewish targets. The **UAE** saw an increase in incidents (from 1 to 6), in part reflecting a crack-down on expatriate churches meeting in unauthorised places, and the increased number of incidents in **Bahrain** (from 1 to 4) mainly involved converts facing pressure from their family or communities.



## THEMES

**A total of 14 cases of persecution handled in 2018 involved martyrdom.** Of these, nine were updates on cases involving murders of Christians in previous years (in Egypt, Iraq, Palestine and Turkey). In the five recorded cases in 2018, a total of 13 were killed. One case was in Egypt (one attack on Coptic visitors to a monastery in which seven were killed), two cases were in Iraq (attacks on Christian families in which four were killed) and two cases were in Syria (attacks on political and security targets within Christian communities, killing two. These attacks were interpreted by those communities as having been deliberate acts of intimidation). All of those killed in these cases were Christian-background believers, killed in extremist or politically-motivated attacks against Christian targets. 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 2018.

Our analysis of the source of persecution showed **state authorities were the perpetrator in 51% of cases**, consistent with previous years. Contributing significantly to this in 2018 was the large number of cases in Iran in almost all of which involved state authorities.

**The family or community were responsible in 35% of cases, and extremist groups in 15%.** This reflects the key challenge, throughout the region, for converts to Christianity which comes primarily from family and community – routinely involving ostracism and often threats of violence. The number of cases involving extremists fell slightly compared with previous years, perhaps reflecting the weakening of Daesh. However, the extremist threat remains strong – it is notable that, in cases involving martyrdom, most were perpetrated by extremists.



**In 56% 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 82% of cases.** The target in 9% was a national of another MENA country, and in 9% 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 58% of cases, and in 27% of cases the target was a church or institution (a significant proportion of the latter were cases in Egypt, involving disputes over the licensing of places of worship).

**Just 8% of total cases handled involved believers fleeing out of the region.** A decrease from the previous year, this reflects MEC's firm policy to only encourage or assist relocation outside the MENA region as a last resort. 14% of cases involved relocation within the region and 7% relocation within the home country. While it is encouraging that some have found local or regional relocation options, for some these options may not provide permanent solutions. Those who flee are predominantly converts from Islam – either fleeing from family-based threats, or, especially in the case of Iranians, fleeing state oppression.

**The most commonly recorded forms of persecution were detention (66 cases, 22%), legal discrimination and violent threats (both 62 cases, 21%).** Of the detention cases, 40 were in Iran, some of them long-standing. 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 17%.** Community-based sectarian church property disputes featured prominently in Egypt; and Turkey and Israel continued to see several examples of vandalism of places of worship. Government action against churches in Algeria continued, as did the Sudanese government's campaign of confiscation or destruction of church property.

**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 Middle East and North Africa, 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 initiate legal challenge would be intimidating, costly or would exacerbate dangers.





## NUMBERS



**The total number of incidents handled in 2018 was 353 (compared to 297 in 2017 and 342 in 2016).** A total of 56 incidents were unverified or were confirmed not to have been cases of persecution. Of the remaining 297 confirmed cases of persecution, 15 were long-standing cases which MEC continued to monitor but in which there were no substantive engagement in 2018. The number of active religious persecution cases in 2018 was therefore 282 (246 in 2017; 285 in 2016).

Despite the rise in cases, **it cannot be deduced that the persecution of Christians was more severe in 2018 than in 2017.** MEC is aware that these listings of incidents must be regarded as only partial, due to limitations of MEC's capacity, the secrecy in which many Christians (especially converts) operate and the challenge of obtaining information from many parts of the region.

**MEC had direct input in 201 (68%) of active cases.** This compares with 176 (72%) in 2017 and 157 (53%) in 2016). These are the cases in which MEC provided consultancy, mobilised prayer, initiated advocacy, or provided financial or other practical support. The level of direct input has been sustained despite a rise in the number of cases handled.

**A majority of cases (189, 64%) handled in 2018 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' is 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 2018, of the 90 cases which were neither 'pending' nor 'irreversible', 46% showed positive outcomes and 54% showed negative outcomes – a slightly higher proportion of positive outcomes than in 2017. 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. And 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

## Does MEC make a difference? Do we have a positive impact on Christian (and non-Christian) communities of the MENA region?

The knowledge our resources are available, along with MEC's reputation for trustworthiness provides a level of comfort for those in difficult situations.

Christians in the MENA region play a central role in assisting MEC as we respond to claims of persecution. We verify such claims through liaison with a network of trusted local church and ministry leaders. Any appropriate 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 authorization. We work with and for MENA Christians.

With our resources and expertise, MEC involvement increases the ability of those facing pressures to handle their plight wisely, which can reduce immediate adverse consequences and facilitate constructive local responses. Specific forms of practical assistance, including financial support where appropriate, enable Christians to maintain dignity and a livelihood during and following a crisis, leading to improved long-term outcomes.

Through MEC's seminar and training programme, we assist MENA Christians in preparing well for possible persecution, in mitigating risks of adverse reactions when possible and to react wisely when persecution does come. The programme also equips them to be proactive in asserting and defending their right to religious freedom.

When we make situations known to the wider Christian community it encourages and sustains those who are being persecuted, knowing they are not alone in their suffering, that there are those standing with them. Knowing that others are supporting them with advocacy and prayer increases their resolve and ability to endure their suffering.

Victims, and those supporting them, express appreciation to MEC for the prayers of Christians around the world. And those doing the praying thank us for giving them the opportunity to provide such support and encouragement.

The impact of MEC's work reaches beyond the Christian communities of the MENA region. As MEC informs national Christians on their constitutional and other legal rights, the engagements can lead to the protection and enhancement of religious freedoms for the benefit of all citizens. Addressing specific human rights violations contributes over time to effecting change in a country's underlying structural issues.

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



### TURKEY

*The case of imprisoned American pastor Andrew Brunson was one of the most high profile cases handled by MEC in 2018.*

*Arrested with his wife Norine in October 2016 as a "threat to national security," Andrew went through considerable hardship in prison while the American and Turkish governments squabbled over his fate in what became a highly politicised case.*

*In 2018, after a series farcical trial, Andrew was sentenced to three years, one month and 15 days' imprisonment for "knowingly aiding terror organisations." The judge ruled he had served enough time in prison and could be released with a one-year suspended sentence. Andrew was flown to the U.S. and was received by President Trump.*

*MEC involvement: Multiple prayer requests, international political advocacy and consultancy with the Brunson family and legal team.*



# ASSISTING INDIVIDUALS

From its inception, the church has come together not only for worship and fellowship but to support each other in time of need, both spiritually and materially. MEC continues to follow that example, assisting those in the MENA region who are facing persecution because of their Christian faith or activities.

Requests for assistance, from individuals or those authorized to speak for them, are examined by our regional managers, who seek verification through local partners. When incidents are confirmed as persecution, MEC works with those local partners, providing appropriate support.

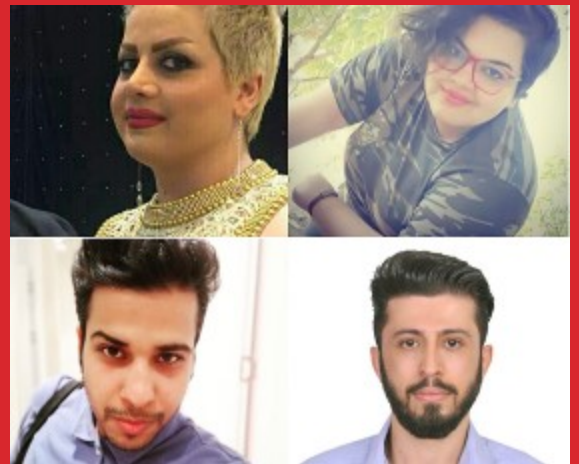
MEC assists victims of persecution by: offering encouragement and informed, trustworthy expertise; mobilizing worldwide prayer, in both open and confidential networks (in 2018 prayer was requested in 90 cases and 139 prayer requests were issued, 71 to open networks and 68 to confidential networks); initiating political advocacy on behalf of victims of persecution (in 2018 there were 31 cases which involved advocacy); and providing practical and financial support (in 2018 there were: 148 incidents with consultancy provided; 88 cases which involved relocation efforts; and 37 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 £149,000, or approximately \$195,000 US, was dispensed).

## IRAN

*With more than 150 people known to have been detained in a December 2018 crackdown, one leader remarked that different branches of the security forces might be competing for approval and funding by demonstrating their effectiveness in arresting Christians.*

*On 2 December 2018 in Ahvaz, security forces raided the homes of Shima Zanganeh and her sister Shokoofeh Zanganeh, Farzad Behzadzadeh and Abdollah Yousefi confiscating Bibles, music CDs, cell phones and computers. Shima and Shokoofeh reportedly were physically assaulted during interrogation. Shokoofeh was released on bail on 25 December. Shima was released on bail on 31 December 2018. The whereabouts of Farzad and Abdollah remain unknown.*

*MEC reached out to Iranian church leaders, offering support in a difficult time for Christians in Iran. Prayer requests were issued and an advocacy campaign raised international awareness of the situation faced by Iranian Christians.*



## CASE ANALYSIS

Much of the work of Middle East Concern is to assist individuals who are facing religious persecution. The numbers in this report represent people: fathers and mothers, children and grandparents whose rights are being violated by others. The statistics tell only part of the story. By their nature they do not show the human element, which is something we never forget.

## CASES AND COUNTRIES

Incidents & Cases	2018	2017	2016	2015
Total incidents	353	297	342	370
Verified as not religious persecution	23	21	25	14
Unverified	33	12	17	19
Total religious persecution cases	297	264	300	337
Ongoing, no change during year	15	18	15	28
Active religious persecution cases in year	282	246	285	309
Religious persecution cases in 2018 with active MEC involvement	201 (68%)	176 (72%)	157 (53%)	156 (50%)

Countries (all 353 incidents)					
Iran	51	Israel	15	Bahrain	4
Egypt	45	Palestine	12	Kuwait	4
Iraq	34	Lebanon	11	Libya	4
Jordan	34	Yemen	11	Tunisia	4
Syria	28	Morocco	8	Oman	3
Turkey	28	Sudan	7	Mauritania	2
Algeria	18	UAE	6	Qatar	2
Saudi Arabia	17	Somalia	5	N. Cyprus	0

## MEC INVOLVEMENT

(297 active cases in 2018; some cases have more than one type of involvement)

Active involvement			Passive involvement		
Total	201	(68%)	Total	96	(32%)
<i>of which</i>			<i>of which</i>		
Consultancy	148	(74%)	Watching brief	44	(51%)
Prayer	90	(45%)	Local action	11	(17%)
Advocacy	31	(15%)	No appropriate action	20	(21%)
Funding	37	(18%)	No authorisation	26	(26%)

## VICTIMS OF PERSECUTION

(297 cases, including those monitored during 2018)

Target		Nationality		Background	
Individual	172 (58%)	National	244 (82%)	Christian	120 (40%)
Leader	36 (12%)	Other MENA	27 (9%)	Muslim	166 (56%)
Church/Organisation	80 (27%)	Expat	26 (9%)	Other Convert	11 (4%)
Mix	9 (3%)				

## SOURCE AND TYPE OF PERSECUTION

(297 cases, including those monitored during 2018)

Perpetrator	
State	150 (51%)
Extremist	44 (15%)
Community	47 (16%)
Family	56 (19%)

Type (some cases involved more than one type)			
Death	15 (5%)	Legal discrimination	62 (21%)
Detention	66 (22%)	Child Custody	7 (2%)
Abduction	4 (1%)	Property damage	31 (10%)
Physical harm	49 (16%)	Property seizure	24 (8%)
Violent threats	61 (21%)	Event disruption	9 (3%)
General harassment	42 (14%)	Deported / denied entry	16 (5%)
Forced conversion	6 (2%)	Employment	8 (3%)
Forced to flee	55 (19%)	Education	7 (2%)

Relocation	
None	209 (51%)
In-country	20 (7%)
In-region	43 (14%)
Out-of-region	25 (8%)

# CHALLENGING INJUSTICE

MEC challenges unjust laws, policies and attitudes - when action is authorized by those involved. We do research-based advocacy on the underlying legal and structural issues behind persecution, campaign for the reinstatement of civil rights to converts from Islam and address unhealthy responses to persecution (such as hasty relocation to the West).

MEC's advocacy network ranges from members of parliament and government officials in North America, Europe, Australasia, the Far East, South and Central America, to officials within the different institutions of the UN and EU. Through regular contact we help lawmakers stay abreast of developments, providing suggestions as to how they may support those facing persecution. We advocate on behalf of Christian individuals and organizations facing persecution, as well as on specific issues, seeking equality under the law for all citizens.

## COLLABORATIVE INITIATIVES

MEC continues to work with Open Doors (OD) 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.

This seven-year campaign, launched in 2015, is designed to provide support, encouragement and advocacy for the church in the region, with an initial focus on Syria and Iraq. This advocacy project is organised in four main sections: 'Listen', 'Educate', 'Mobilise' and 'Influence.' MEC leads the 'Listen' activities, and also contributes to the 'Influence' activities.

Additionally, MEC works with OD, offering expertise in compiling the annual World Watch List of countries in which Christians face persecution.

In 2018 MEC continued collaborations with advocating for Christians in Iran. Working with Open Doors, Article 18 and Christian Solidarity Worldwide, MEC prepared the 2018 report on violations of the rights of Christians in Iran.

MEC is a founding member of the Religious Liberty Partnership.



## ALGERIA

*The Algerian government continued its policy of closing Christian meeting places, but such actions have failed to stop congregations from meeting for worship.*

*Since 2006, churches have been required to obtain permission before using a building for non-Muslim worship. However, the authorities have failed to respond to almost all applications by churches affiliated with the legally-registered EPA. Given the lack of response, it has become standard practice for churches to rent premises and inform local authorities that they are using their premises as places of worship.*

*In 2018 several churches were ordered sealed by authorities, though some were later permitted to reopen.*

*MEC sent out multiple prayer requests, consulted extensively with the EPA and worked closely with other advocacy organisations on a campaign that included bringing Algerian church leaders to Europe and the USA to brief political leaders first-hand about the issues they face.*

# BUILDING SUPPORT NETWORKS



MEC's support networks serve two primary functions: gathering information and supporting those facing persecution.

MEC has a network of people in the MENA region who assist us directly with our work, alerting us to situations where individuals or churches are being persecuted for their Christian faith. They also provide advice and verification.

Our contacts are in every country in the region. They include 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 organizations. We turn to them to verify information, to evaluate possible responses and often they are part of the response effort.

Our networks outside of MENA provide financial support, political advocacy, refugee assistance, expert resources and prayer.

At the time of writing the numbers of recipients in MEC's distribution networks are:

Private prayer	792
Public prayer	2,463
Advocacy requests	603



Many recipients forward our public prayer requests to their own networks, expanding our reach to many more prayer partners. MEC includes distribution guidelines at the head of all advocacy and prayer requests.

## ADVOCACY REQUESTS

While some advocacy requests are sent to our entire network, many are sent to only those individuals assessed as having the greatest potential for effective engagement and influence for the specific case.

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

## PRESS RELEASES

MEC issued no press releases in 2018. However, information from public prayer requests regularly appeared in Christian media.



## PRAYER REQUESTS

A total of 139 prayer requests were issued in 2018: 68 to private networks and 71 to those networks as well as more general circulation. Those were also posted on MEC's website 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



[www.meconcern.org](http://www.meconcern.org)

MEC's website received 29,000 page views in 2018, about a thousand more than the previous year. 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.



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

In early 2019 MEC had 874 followers on Facebook, compared to 697 in early 2018.



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

In early 2019, MEC had 2,343 followers on Twitter, compared to 2,329 in early 2018.



[praynow4.org/meconcern](http://praynow4.org/meconcern)

In November 2018 MEC made daily prayer requests available to mobile phone users via the PrayerMate app, which can be downloaded for Apple or Android operating systems. Each day users have the opportunity to pray for an issue facing Christians in the countries of the MENA region.

# TRAINING & EQUIPPING

MEC supports Christians in the Middle East and North Africa region by equipping them to face persecution.

Training is an important part of what we do to support Christians in the Middle East and North Africa.

MEC staff conducted seminars and training sessions with participants from every country in the MENA region, from Christian leaders and congregants to expatriate workers.

We do this, when requested or authorised to do so by Christian leaders, through 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).

MEC works to encourage and empower the church (and individual Christians) in the Middle East and North Africa to become an agent for positive change in societies and communities for all who suffer injustice, not only for Christians.

The seminars are customised for each audience, and 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.

Outside the region we conduct awareness-raising seminars to better acquaint participants with the issues faced by Christians in the Middle East and North Africa.



## EXAMPLES

**Legal Training Course:** This seminar 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, 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 after 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 those undergoing the asylum and resettlement process. Proper preparation for and understanding of the process reduces the individual's stress level.



The Refugee Status Determination interview is part of the verification process to confirm that the asylum seeker is indeed a refugee as defined by international conventions. Given that many people make false claims about persecution to bolster their case, interviewers may reject valid claims if they detect inconsistencies. This seminar helps asylum seekers 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. Asylum seekers with genuine claims of religious persecution who have taken the seminar will be better prepared to face the interview.



# STAFF & FINANCE

## STAFF

At the end of 2018 there were nine people in the MEC staff team. There were two departures during the year. Discussions were underway with regards to adding more staff in 2019.

In 2018 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 14 of the 24 countries and territories in the Middle East and North Africa region (one more than in 2017). They attended 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 22 countries outside the Middle East and North Africa region specifically to develop MEC’s support networks (also one more than in 2017).

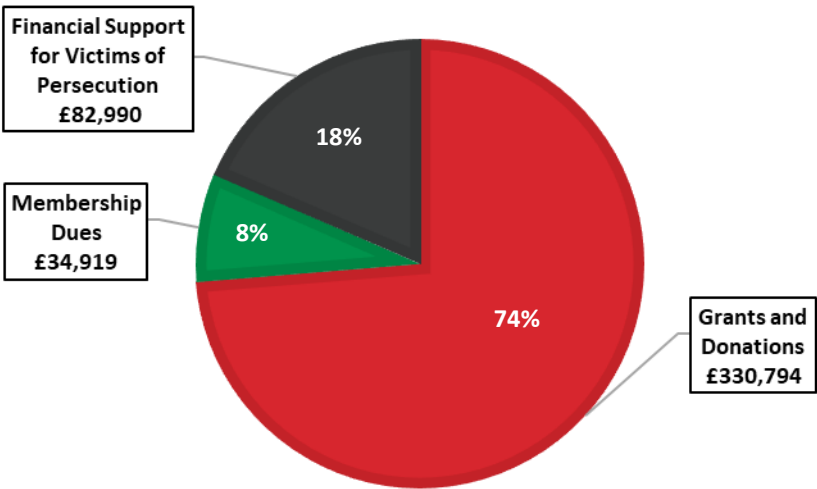
## FINANCE

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.

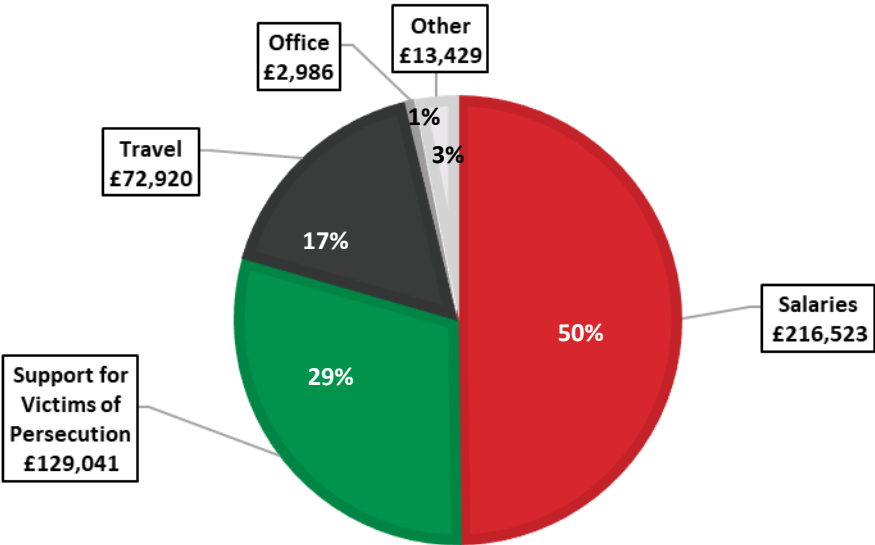
### Income:

Total: £448,703



### Expenditure:


Total: £462,352





MIDDLE  
EAST  
CONCERN


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 [praynow4.org/  
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