

# Mideast patriarch: Unify efforts against extremism, terrorism

BEIRUT (CNS) – At a gathering of Middle East leaders coinciding with the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the Syriac Orthodox patriarch emphasized the need to unify efforts against extremism and terrorism.

“A hundred years after the genocide during the Ottoman Empire and major displacements,” Christians in the region are still facing similar circumstances, said Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II of Antioch.

“Many of our churches have been destroyed and hundreds of thousands of our Christian brothers have been forced to migrate from the land of their fathers,” Patriarch Aphrem said. “To whose benefit is it if the region is emptied of Christians?”

He opened the Jan. 22-23 executive committee meeting of the Middle East Council of Churches, which he hosted at the patriarchal residence in Atchaneh, Lebanon.

Members of the executive committee attending the meeting included Iraqi Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako, patriarch of Chaldean Catholics; the Rev. Habib Badr, senior pastor of the National Evangelical Church of Beirut; and Souraya Bechealany, acting secretary-general of Middle East Council of Churches; as well as bishops and representatives from Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant churches in the Middle East.

Patriarch Aphrem called for regular meetings, at both the spiritual and political levels, to unify efforts against extremism and terrorism, as well as “to promote the principles of coexistence, human values, religious freedom and the

spiritual and social values that exist.”

“We know that our future is the future of living together with our Muslim brothers,” the patriarch said, adding that “if we want to have a secure future,” all must work together.

The patriarch lamented “the great silence of the great world powers” regarding the fate of two bishops kidnapped in Syria nearly six years ago, Orthodox Metropolitan Paul of Aleppo and Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan Gregorios Yohanna of Aleppo.

In its final statement, the executive committee called on “the international community and the Arab world to work for the release of the kidnapped bishops” as well as priests and lay abductees.

It called for “the establishment of peace in Syria and the dignified and safe return of displaced persons to their homeland and for the restoration of Iraq’s recovery and the return of uprooted children to their land.”

It rejected the decision to declare Jerusalem the capital of “the occupying power” and called for the “realization of the state of Palestine stipulated in the relevant international resolutions.”

It also condemned “all forms of extremism and terrorism,” expressing their hope for the “cooperation between churches and Islamic authorities to build a religious discourse” based on “the values of love, peace, social justice and dialogue.”