

# Maronite bishops: 'Christian presence in Middle East must be preserved'

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Maronite Catholic bishops pose for a photo during their June 13-17 annual synod at Bkerke, the patriarchal seat north of Beirut, Lebanon (CNS)

The bishops released a statement at the conclusion of their synod in which they rejected a partitioning of the Middle East

Maronite Catholic bishops from around the world warned against plans to partition the Middle East and urged Christians to stand firm and to preserve co-existence with Muslims.

In a statement at the conclusion of their June 13-17 synod, the bishops stressed the importance of continuing the presence of Maronite Catholics in Lebanon and the region.

Particularly after reviewing the situation of Maronite bishops in Syrian eparchies in Damascus, Aleppo and Latakia, the prelates resisted "all international plans" for partitioning the region and called instead to preserve "living together, Christians and Muslims, in a climate of freedom, democracy and respect for diversity."

They decried the suffering of the Syrian people, especially in recent months due to the worsening war and the deterioration of the economy and the national currency stressing that "poverty has become universal."

The bishops pointed out that in Aleppo, people are suffering from "a scarcity of (the) necessities of life, such as water, electricity and food, and the demolition of homes and the loss of life-taking, in addition to thousands of dead and wounded, widows and the displaced."

Lebanon borders Syria, and the bishops called on the international community to support Lebanon with financial support "to provide adequate assistance" to Lebanon's two million displaced – most of whom are Syrians – and "to work seriously for their early return to their country."

The bishops repeated their demand for the election of a president for Lebanon. The country's institutional system, based on the National Pact of 1943, provides that the office of the president be occupied by a Maronite Catholic.

"The bishops discussed the presidential vacancy that continues for more than two years and called upon deputies and political factions to explain frankly about the real reasons that prevent a head of state election," said the statement.

The bishops also emphasised "the negative impact of the presidential vacuum on political, security, economic and social levels," as well as the disruption of constitutional and administrative institutions.

Deploring the deteriorating economic and social conditions of the Lebanese and the growing number of those living below the poverty line, they called on officials “to develop a rescue plan that promotes the country’s economy.” They also praised “the tremendous efforts” of the Lebanese army and security forces in maintaining security and civil peace and the protection of citizens.

The bishops commended the efforts of parishes in marital reconciliation and marriage preparation. They also announced Maronite World Youth Day in Lebanon on July 15-23, under the theme “Be Strong and Courageous.”

The synod, presided by Cardinal Bechara Rai, Maronite patriarch, took place at the patriarchal seat of Bkerke, north of Beirut. It was preceded by a spiritual retreat

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