

# We Choose Abundant Life A Document Prompted by the Arab Spring?

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## Introduction

On 4 March 2005, the Lebanese historian and journalist Samir Kassir (1960–2005) wrote: “When the spring of the Arabs blossoms in Beirut, it announces the time of roses in Damascus.”<sup>1</sup> Kassir penned these words shortly before a wave of demonstrations in downtown Beirut, backed by a favorable constellation in international politics, pushed the Syrian military troops to withdraw from Lebanese territory. Had Kassir, at that time, an intuition of what was about to sweep across the whole Middle East within less than six years? Kassir obviously expressed a dream that went far beyond Lebanon. Was this all-embracing dream nourished by the fact that his mother was Syrian, whereas his father came originally from Palestine? Be that as it may. It is a fact that Kassir not only coined the term *Spring of the Arabs*, but also stamped it with his own blood: he was assassinated in Beirut on 2 June 2005.

In the meantime, one speaks of two waves of the *Arab Spring*:<sup>2</sup> The first one, launched by uprisings in Tunisia in 2010, rapidly spread to Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain. The second wave swept through Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon in 2019. In both cases, silence appears to have been the prevailing attitude of the church leadership. The kind of silence I have in mind is less quantitative than qualitative. For church leaders have been speaking and continue to speak. One would even be inclined to say that there exists sometimes a hypertrophy of church discourse. It is usually that kind of discourse that underscores how necessary it is to stop violence and build peace, lays emphasis on conviviality

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<sup>1</sup> See Samir Kassir, “Bayrūt rabī‘ al-‘arab [Beirut: Spring of the Arabs]” in: *Intifādat al-istiqlāl kamā rawāhā* [The independence Uprising as He Narrated It], (Beirut: Dar an-nahār, 2005), 7.

<sup>2</sup> On the *Arab Spring* see, for example, Najib Awad, *And Freedom Became a Public-Square: Political, Sociological and Religious Overviews on the Arab Christians and the Arabic Spring* (Münster: Lit, 2012); Mark L. Haas and David W. Lesch, eds., *The Arab Spring: The Hope and Reality of the Uprisings* (London: Routledge, 2016).

between Christians and Muslims, and foregrounds the role of several Middle Eastern countries, such as Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon, as melting pots of cultures and religions.<sup>3</sup> In sum: a proliferation of what we usually call *loci communes*, that is, general and common ideas repeated in almost every occasion.

It goes without saying that there have been a few important exceptions. For example, a young Syrian monk called Nibrās Shuhayyid wrote, during the Syrian war, impressive theological texts about God's solidarity with the victims.<sup>4</sup> Over the recent two years, the Sunday homilies of the Maronite patriarch Bishāra al-Rā'ī have increasingly addressed the problems generated by the political and economic crisis in Lebanon in all their acuteness. Nevertheless, what has been missing in church discourse since the outbreak of the *Arab Spring* is a comprehensive vision and an overarching interpretative framework that can help to approach the past and present of Middle Eastern Christians both critically and constructively, without losing sight of the significant geopolitical shifts that are currently reshaping the region and are likely to heavily affect the future of its population in the long run. It may not be an exaggeration to say that the document *We Choose Abundant Life* [WCAL]<sup>5</sup> is a serious and unique attempt thus far to fill this gap, i.e., to provide this vision and interpretative framework.

## Genesis

The need for the aforementioned change in Middle Eastern Christian discourse was perceived by Mr. Ziad El Sayegh, one of the authors of the WCAL-document, as early as 2018. El Sayegh expressed this need within the framework of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) upon his appointment as Policies and Communication advisor there (2018–2020). At that time, Rev. Dr. Gabriel Alfred Hachem, another author

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, the official Communiqué of the Holy Synod of the Greek-Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch issued on 27 June 2015, [antiochpatriarchate.org/en/page/1135/](http://antiochpatriarchate.org/en/page/1135/), accessed April 8, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Nibrās Shuhayyid, *Bayna al-ilāh al-mafqūd wa-l-jasad al-musta'ād: Fuṣūl min ath-thawra as-sūriyya* [Between the Lost God and the Recuperated Body: Chapters from the Syrian Revolution] (Damaskus: Bayt al-muwāṭin li-n-nashr wa-t-tawzī', 2014), *Shahadāt sūriyya* 3.

<sup>5</sup> Souraya Bechealany, Khalil Chalfoun, Gabriel Alfred Hachem, Assaad Elias Kattan, George Jabra Al-Kopti, Michel Nseir, Mitri Raheb, Ziad El Sayegh, Emilie Tannous and Roupheal Zgheib, *We Choose Abundant Life. Christians in the Middle East: Towards Renewed Theological, Social, and Political Choices* [WCAL] (Beirut: We Choose Abundant Life Group, 2021), par. 9.

of the same document, oversaw the MECC Department of Theological Affairs and Ecumenical Relations. Thanks to Dr. Souraya Bechealany, then Secretary General of the MECC, the idea of producing a written text about the Christians in the Middle East from the perspective of contextual theology was adopted as an official MECC project that had to be gradually implemented under the working title *Kairos Middle East*. Hachem and El Sayegh assumed the lead.

In this regard, two methodological features are worth noting: First, it comes as no surprise that, from the very beginning, the document was meant to combine in a very balanced fashion two perspectives, a theological and a geopolitical one – somehow after the model of its two leaders, an expert in geopolitical issues (El Sayegh) and a theological scholar (Hachem). The theological method that best matched this double approach was contextual theology. It is depicted by the document as an approach “examining theological discourse and religious practices in the light of rigorous scientific and critical criteria based on the achievements of human sciences, on the one hand, and scrutinizing the geopolitical situation in the light of theology, on the other.”<sup>6</sup> Second, it was unanimously decided that the document should take shape by appealing to an inductive methodology, that is, from the bottom to the top. Accordingly, the team responsible for this project organized, in 2019 and 2020, a couple of consultations with experts in theology, political and social sciences, media, art, and literature, as well as with a group of young people and a few Muslim and Jewish thinkers. These meetings were meticulously documented and summarized in dozens of pages.

However, most of the Middle Eastern churches, represented in the MECC primarily by their church leaders, had massive difficulties identifying with the methodology and the nascent content of *Kairos Middle East*, the fruit of think tanks that were extremely vocal in criticizing church leadership and its repetitive and stagnating discourse. It became obvious that the projected document would carry the imprint of a society in effervescence, where a new awareness was burgeoning – an awareness hostile to political and religious authoritarianism, dismissive of the ontology of conspiracy theories, and allergic to ascribing the problems of the Arab countries to a real or constructed enemy. In September 2020, a new MECC Secretary General, Dr. Michel Abs, was appointed. Shortly after, Rev. Hachem and Mr. El Sayegh stepped down from MECC and asked a few experts from Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon, who

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<sup>6</sup> WCAL, par. 3.

were all involved in the preparatory process, whether or not they agreed to be members of an ecumenical drafting committee and to assume the full responsibility of the text in its final form. The answer was unanimously positive. In a further stage, however, an Egyptian colleague, a female social scientist, left the drafting committee without offering any explanation whatsoever. It is also worth mentioning that the strenuous efforts deployed by the committee to find a Syrian member living in Syria were unsuccessful. The *Kairos Middle East* document left thereby the MECC tutelage, and thus the sphere of the official churches, and became the full responsibility of an independent group of theologians and political and social scientists. It was issued as WCAL on 28 September 2021 in Antelias, a suburb of Beirut. Amid the Covid-19 crisis, it took roughly one year to draft it, two in-person meetings in Lebanon and many digital sessions.

### **WCAL, *Nahḍa*, and the Arab Spring**

WCAL marries a theological and a geopolitical approach. It thus expresses its authors' conviction that church life does not happen in a vacuum, nor is it impermeable to social changes, but is rather deeply affected by geopolitical, political, and social factors. Consequently, theological discourse ought to be prophetic. Instead of interpreting sacred texts and describing church life as if they were isolated from what is really at stake in every day's life, church discourse should take up the challenges of societies in the Middle East and engage them fearlessly and creatively. In sum: Church discourse must be not only descriptive and explanatory, but also corrective.

Within this framework, I would like to formulate the following hypothesis and try to substantiate it: one of WCAL's salient features is a hermeneutical decision that has never been taken by any other document dealing with the situation of the Christians in the Middle East thus far. It consists of drawing a connective line between the so-called *Nahḍa*, i.e., the Arab revival witnessed by the Middle East after Napoleon Bonaparte's campaign in Egypt in 1789,<sup>7</sup> on the one hand, and the *Arab Spring*, on

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<sup>7</sup> See, f.e., Albert H. Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798–1939* (Cambridge: University Press, 1983); George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement* (London: Capricorn Books, 1965), first edition: 1938; Donald M. Reid, *The Odyssey of Farah Antun: A Syrian Christian's Quest for Secularism* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1975), *Studies in Middle Eastern History* 2; Anne-Laure Dupont, *Ḡurġī Zaydān (1861–1914): écrivain réformiste et témoin de la renaissance arabe* (Damascus: Presses de l'IFPO, 2006); Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab*

the other. *Nahḍa* is an Arabic term usually translated as *Renaissance*, but which literally means the act of rising or moving upwards. It is used in Arabic to indicate both the revival of European arts and sciences in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as well as the reawakening of Arab culture in Modern Times. Designative of the cultural and scientific revival of the Arabs especially on the threshold of the nineteenth century, the *Nahḍa* is far from being a mere literary and linguistic project. In fact, it had an extremely significant political dimension too, since several of its makers advocated the idea that human reason, and not religion, is responsible for managing the affairs of society. Whilst religion is particular, they assumed, reason is general by being common to all human beings. Several leading *Nahḍa* figures were thus in favor of separating religion and state.<sup>8</sup>

When amid the uprisings of the *Arab Spring* young people, especially in Egypt and Lebanon, brought to the fore the idea of citizenship, they were joining, according to WCAL, consciously or subconsciously, one of the guiding ideas of the Arab Renaissance more than one century before: “The state cannot be built on particularities, such as religion, race, or colour, but rather on what humanity has in common,”<sup>9</sup> i.e. reason. Citizenship thus becomes one of WCAL’s key concepts.<sup>10</sup> There is, however, a new awareness brought by the *Arab Spring*, which WCAL emphasizes time and again. It is a keen sense of the overriding importance of diversity. For the Middle East is not only the cradle of “Abrahamic” religions and a melting pot of languages, ethnicities, and cultures, but also a space where women and young people exist and must be heard and reckoned with.<sup>11</sup> It is WCAL’s contention that the concept of citizenship, reminiscent of one of the major *Nahḍa* ideas, the centrality of reason, can be instrumental in protecting and managing this diversity as well as in helping people to overcome fear, avoid social fragmentation, and combat emigration.<sup>12</sup>

A further underlying principle of the document in question is the idea of church reform. From the very beginning, it was clear that WCAL would be a piece of corrective contextual theology. In this respect, I would dare to say that the document also assumes and sticks to an approach evocative of the *Arab Spring*. For one of the distinctive features of the

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*Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 17–47.

<sup>8</sup> This is, for instance, the stance of the novelist and journalist Faraḥ Antūn (1874–1922); see Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 32.

<sup>9</sup> WCAL, par. 12.

<sup>10</sup> See, f.e., WCAL, par. 21, 56, 59.

<sup>11</sup> WCAL, par. 6–9, 30–33, 48, 69, 86, 87.

<sup>12</sup> WCAL, par. 20–24, 53–64.

uprisings was to dismantle conspiracy theories by telling politicians that they, not imagined enemies, were responsible for the miserable social and political conditions in the Arab world. Along the same lines, WCAL challenges the narrative of a Christian minority persecuted by an Islamic majority<sup>13</sup> by telling the church leadership that one of the main predicaments of church life in the Middle East has to do with them, not with real or imagined persecutors. WCAL exposes thus rampant corruption in church institutions, the lack of sound governance and transparency, and the reluctance to engage modernity and postmodernity creatively,<sup>14</sup> i.e. in a way that goes beyond using cellphones and having recourse to media channels to propagate antiquated theological material. Hence the plea in WCAL for an extensive project of renewal that should cover all areas of church life, including theological discourse, liturgy, canon law, educational and medical institutions, and last but not least the role of women and youth in the churches and the relationship to the state: “Churches in the Middle East today need to listen to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and undergo a genuine inner reform that will echo the dynamics of the Gospel and a genuine prophetic spirit, allowing for an authentic dialogue with the world in this post-modern era.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Ecumenism and Interreligious Relations**

Furthermore, WCAL is a document about genuine ecumenism, synodality, dialogue, and brotherhood/sisterhood, all of them subsumed under one key term: togetherness. Conceived, drafted, issued, and diffused ecumenically, WCAL offers a sustained argument in favor of synodality<sup>16</sup> not only as a guiding principle of life within each church, but also as the compass of ecumenism and a beacon to illuminate how Christians must relate to the world: “Synodality must first be lived within each Church, then among the Churches, and finally in communion with the world.”<sup>17</sup>

As concerns dialogue with the faithful of other religions, WCAL makes a strong plea for a dialogue with the Muslims that abandons “doublespeak” and lays “conceptual and pragmatic foundations for the role that must be assumed by both religions in safeguarding freedom of conscience and building local, regional and global peace.”<sup>18</sup> Far from

<sup>13</sup> WCAL, par. 57 and 94.

<sup>14</sup> WCAL, par. 47, 49, 81, 89.

<sup>15</sup> WCAL, par. 81.

<sup>16</sup> The Greek term *synodos* (*synodeuein*, accompany, journey with) suggests less the idea of convoking a meeting than treading a path together.

<sup>17</sup> WCAL, par. 34.

<sup>18</sup> WCAL, par. 93.

being an urge to forsake theological dialogue, the document emphasizes the pressing urgency to scrutinize, together with the Muslims, the issue of freedom of conscience, thought, and expression, which is still approached in different, even contradictory ways by Muslim theologians and students of the sharī'a.

As far as dialogue with Judaism is concerned, the document calls for opening "a new page in relations with Jews,"<sup>19</sup> while endorsing a categorical rejection of any confusion between the notions of Judaism, Zionism, and the State of Israel.<sup>20</sup> In doing so, it distances itself not only from a Middle Eastern temptation to associate all Jews with the state of Israel, but also from the temptation of unconditional solidarity with the latter, observed in some Western circles. It is not out of context to say that these two attitudes are ultimately two reverses of the same medal, for they both rest upon an overt or tacit conflation of the Jews all over the world with the state of Israel. Far from demonizing the Jews because of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory, or dealing with the state of Israel uncritically despite its occupation policies, the WCAL authors take a middle path that seeks to avoid both Middle Eastern extremism as well as that of some Western ecumenical partners. By treading this path, they put forward a theological option that presents a double advantage: On the one hand, it can initiate a dialogue with a considerable number of Western Christians on how they relate to the injustice perpetrated by the state of Israel against the Palestinians. On the other hand, it can pave the way for an authentic and serious dialogue with the Jews, a dialogue "based on the values of justice, peace, the dignity of creation and humanity".<sup>21</sup> Though intrinsically theological, this option encapsulates tremendous political potential.

## Conclusion

Against this background, WCAL may be described as a text prompted by the *Arab Spring*. This is mainly demonstrated by how it relates to, and builds on, ideas such as citizenship and diversity. Inasmuch as this diversity encompasses not only Christians, but also Middle Eastern Muslims and Jews, WCAL constitutes an attempt to spell out the implications and potentials of the *Arab Spring* for ecumenism and interreligious relations. One may even go further by claiming that WCAL is a document intel-

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<sup>19</sup> WCAL, 92.

<sup>20</sup> WCAL, par. 39.

<sup>21</sup> WCAL, par. 92.



lectually born from the womb of this spring. This is best illustrated by its style and general thrust, its overall critical tone, as well as its categorical dismissal of the ontology of conspiracy theories.

Moreover, WCAL spots a thin but real thread between the aspirations for more democracy, political sharing, and human dignity in Arab countries, on the one hand, and the need for more togetherness, synodality, and equal opportunities in the churches, on the other. In fact, the churches in the Middle East have never been completely hermetic, neither were they fully non-receptive to social changes. On the contrary, it is by no means uncommon that these very social changes have impelled the churches time and again to rediscover the ultimate meaning of the gospel and to act accordingly by reforming themselves. Today, the churches in the Middle East are called upon to behave in the same way. As Samir Kassir once wrote in a different, yet somehow kindred context: if it blossoms somewhere, we know that the roses cannot be far away.