



EMF Office (now EMR) headquarters since 1982. 9 Ferdous Street, Sabtieh, Jdeidet El Metn, Lebanon.

Photo courtesy of Melanie Wixwat.

## East Mediterranean Field (1970–2014)

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### SVEN HAGEN JENSEN, AND MELANIE RICHES WIXWAT

Sven Hagen Jensen, M.Div. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, USA) has worked for the church for over 50 years as a pastor, editor, departmental director, and church administrator in Denmark, Nigeria and the Middle East. Jensen enjoys reading, writing, nature and gardening. He is married to Ingelis and has two adult children and four grandchildren.

Melanie Riches Wixwat, B.B.A. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan), currently lives in Beirut, Lebanon with her husband Michael, the treasurer for Middle East and North Africa Union (MENAUI). She is administrative assistant to the president and the executive secretary of MENAUI in addition to working as assistant to the regional editor for the ESDA project. One of her hobbies is studying Arabic and this has led her to be involved with one of the local Arabic Adventist Churches in Beirut.

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The East Mediterranean Field of Seventh-day Adventists (EMF) was first organized in 1971 under the management of the Middle East Union Mission (MEUM) and the Afro-Mideast Division, both also newly organized in 1970. EMF was comprised of five countries: Cyprus, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey; and its headquarters was located in the Beirut Adventist Center, Sayar, Hotel Deiu Street, Beirut, Lebanon.<sup>1</sup> The total population was 43,750,000, with a combined Adventist membership of 1,160 members worshipping in 16 churches.<sup>2</sup>

### Origin and History of Adventist Work

The Adventist message first entered Turkey, Lebanon, and Syria in 1889, followed by Jordan in 1926 and Cyprus in 1953. Each country operated as a separate section under various unions and divisions; first under the Levant Union Mission in 1907, then as missions operated by the European Division from 1924 to 1927, followed by the Arabic Union Mission until 1944, and the East Mediterranean Union Mission in 1951. For eight years, between 1961 to 1969, the sections were directly attached to the Middle East Division, until it was replaced by the Afro-Mideast Division in 1970.<sup>3</sup>

It was at the annual year-end meeting of the Middle East Union Mission on December 16, 1970, that the East Mediterranean Field came into existence when the committee voted to approve the recommendation of the Afro-Mideast Division to divide its territory into four fields: Iran, Iraq and Kuwait, Egypt, and the EMF.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, the executive committee elected EMF's first president, R. D. Pifer; and secretary-treasurer, George Yared.<sup>5</sup> The governing body included an executive committee of ten nationals and two expatriates. In addition, a team of six departmental secretaries, 12 ordained pastors, 30 credentialed missionaries, two credentialed Bible instructors, seven licensed ministers, 22 licensed missionaries, and two credentialed literature evangelists serviced the territories of the EMF.<sup>6</sup>

Functioning institutions included the Amman Adventist Secondary School in Jordan and six schools in Lebanon: Aramoun Adventist School, Beirut Overseas School, Bishmezzine Adventist School, Bourj Hammoud Adventist School, Middle East Secondary School, and Mouseitbeh Adventist Secondary School.<sup>7</sup> Also located in Lebanon were two evangelistic centers, the Beirut Evangelistic Center and the Bourj Hammoud Adventist Center. In addition, four Bible correspondence schools operated in Cyprus, Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon.<sup>8</sup>

In 1984 Kuwait was temporarily removed from the Iraq Field and added to EMF, due to the political tension between the neighboring countries.<sup>9</sup> The Gaza Strip was added in 1986,<sup>10</sup> but removed the following year.<sup>11</sup> In 1988 both Turkey and Cyprus were removed and became directly attached to MEUM.<sup>12</sup> By 1989 EMF consisted only of Jordan, Lebanon, and the Arab Republic of Syria. By the turn of the century in 2000, there were only eight functioning churches and a membership of 668, which continued to decline over the next decade. In 2011 the *SDA Yearbook* recorded 652 Adventists and seven churches.<sup>13</sup>

The EMF remained under the leadership of MEUM for 42 years, until 2012,<sup>14</sup> when a substantial reorganization took place. The union was dissolved and replaced by the Greater Middle East Union (GMEU), which was attached to the General Conference. This new territory consisted of countries that were previously under the Middle East Union, the Trans-European Division, and the Trans-Mediterranean territories in the Euro-Africa Division.<sup>15</sup>

The EMF was also reorganized to include Iraq, in addition to Jordan, Lebanon, and the Syrian Arab Republic. Membership increased to 766 and there was a total of ten churches. The Iraq Field headquarters moved to Erbil in 2013, purchased land, and built a church.<sup>16</sup>

Out of the seven schools that were operating at the beginning of EMF's organization in 1970, only three remained in 2014: the Bouchrieh Adventist Secondary school, Mouseitbeh Adventist Secondary School in Lebanon, and the Amman Adventist Secondary School in Jordan. All other institutions had permanently come to a halt.<sup>17</sup>

## Period of Turmoil (1970s to late 1990s)

Over the centuries the Middle East has witnessed periods of extreme turbulence and instability due to wars, toppling of regimes, sectarian strife, terrorist forces, and other influences. The Adventist Church was not immune to the conflict during these periods and it suffered greatly. Once again, during the 1970s, several external and internal factors began to significantly impact the progress of the Adventist work in EMF.

Lebanon, a country that had a long and volatile history, enjoyed a time of relative peace and prosperity during the decade preceding the 1970s. It reached the peak of its economic success in the mid-1960s and was considered one of the world's fastest growing economies.<sup>18</sup> However, from 1975 to 1991, a 16-year-long civil war markedly hampered the progress of the Church in Lebanon. Not only was there wide-spread destruction of Adventist properties, but thousands of lives were lost, including the lives of three Adventists.

During the war, most of the Adventist schools and churches were shuttered permanently and many Adventist families immigrated to the United States. All expatriate workers serving at Middle East College, the Middle East Union, and the Afro-Mideast Division were evacuated for safety reasons.

When the MEU quadrennial session took place from February 1 to 5, 1977, the session voted to link together the Middle East Union and the East Mediterranean Field for a two-year period.<sup>19</sup> Pastor Manoug Nazirian, who had become the first national president of EMF in 1977, assumed the additional responsibility as president of the Middle East Union a year later, in 1978, and he continued for another four years in this capacity until 1982.

In 1982 EMF found a more permanent location for its office and moved to 9 Ferdous Street, Sabtieh, Jdeidet El Metn. When, in 1984, the Middle East Union moved its headquarters to Cyprus,<sup>20</sup> national leaders remained in Lebanon and headed the operations throughout the entire war.<sup>21</sup> In addition, they secured the properties owned by the division (GC), the union, and the field itself, several of which were badly damaged by the bombings and could have been taken over by Syrian and Palestine squatters.

The war badly affected communication and transportation of literature between the countries, so evangelistic outreach of the Church in all territories was reduced to a minimum.<sup>22 23</sup>

Syria found itself in a similar situation when it became embroiled in external wars, first aligning with Egypt against Israel, and later in the mid-1970s as it interfered in the Lebanese civil war. In addition, internal factors, due to an increasing number of challenges, misinformation, and false accusations regarding the teaching of the Sabbath, caused organized work in Syria to come to a halt by the mid-1970s. Several Adventists members were

imprisoned, and churches and schools were discontinued. For several decades now, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been banned in Syria. The situation created a diaspora as members of the Adventist faith community were unable to function as an established Christian church.<sup>24</sup>

More unrest occurred in other parts of EMF as Turkey invaded Cyprus in 1974 and captured 36 percent of the island, forcing a split between the Greek and Turkish Cypriots, with Greeks being forced to the south and Turks to the north. All Adventist work was halted for a couple of decades, as expats were forced to return to their countries.

Then later, in 1970, unprecedented violence erupted in Turkey and emphasis of the Adventist work shifted to working from outside of the country. Turkish language cassettes were prepared and sold by literature evangelists to Turks living in Europe. A Bible correspondence school was conducted from Beirut, Lebanon, with lessons prepared in Turkish; and in 1974 Turkish radio broadcasts began from Adventist World Radio in Portugal.<sup>25</sup>

Only in Jordan was the work able to slowly progress without much fanfare. Repeatedly referred to as an “oasis of stability” in the turbulent region of the Middle East, Jordan had been mostly unscathed by the violence that swept the other regions. This stability enabled Seventh-day Adventists to continue to enjoy the recognition they had received in 1931 as a religious organization with its own religious court. Gospel ministers were able to carry on their work without any hindrance.<sup>26</sup> Even though the country suffered from a financial crisis during the 1980s, Adventist church buildings continued to be built, and an Adventist Book Center was registered with the Jordanian government.<sup>27</sup> The Amman Care Home for orphans was established in 1970 as a result of the Arab-Israeli war in 1967,<sup>28</sup> and in 1990 ADRA began operations when Iraq invaded Kuwait and thousands of foreign and Jordanian workers made their way into the country. They operated as an NGO for 11 years until 2001.<sup>29</sup>

## Challenges for the EMF in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

One of the great challenges for the Adventist work in the Middle East region in the 21<sup>st</sup> century was the migration of Adventist members and qualified workers to the West, even before EMF was organized. As a result of the turmoil in the decades following the 1970s, there was even more immigration, leaving EMF at the end of its tenure in 2014 with only two nationals with ministerial credentials.<sup>30</sup>

The clear picture that emerged is one of a Church in numerical and institutional decline, despite the best efforts of dozens of church workers and the huge financial resources poured in by the world Church. EMF struggled to keep afloat and spread the gospel over its 44-year history.

## Reorganizations (2012 and 2015)—from EMF to EMR

In 2015 the Middle East and the North Africa Union Mission replaced GMEU, and the East Mediterranean Field was renamed East Mediterranean Region (EMR), consisting of the same four countries of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and the Syrian Arab Republic.<sup>31</sup> With the closing of several congregations in Iraq, among other factors, church work continued in its decline to six churches and 559 members by the end of 2015.<sup>32</sup>

The challenge of church leadership is to prayerfully reflect on what needs to be done to revitalize the Church and reverse the trend in those countries which are often troubled by civil unrest and war and whose populations are deeply entrenched in centuries of religious beliefs, practices, and cultural traditions and loyalties.

After the Lebanese, Manoug Nazirian, was elected as president for EMF, more nationals followed: Basim Aziz, Samir Chahine, and Levon Maksoudian (longest serving president), which for a time gave profitable insight and stability in a part of the world where Christians, and particularly the Seventh-day Adventist Church, were a small minority. These leaders also functioned as legal representatives of the Church, and even when not in office were able to keep cordial relationships with the authorities.<sup>33</sup>

## EMF Presidents

R. D. Pifer (1971-1974), Borge Schantz (1974-1976), Manoug Nazirian (1977-1983), Basim Aziz (1985-1988), Samir Chahine (1988-1990), Roland Fidelia (1992-1996), Claude Lombart (1996-1998), Sven Jensen (1999-2000), Levon Maksoudian (2001-2011), Miroslav Didara (2012-2013), Ron Vozar (2014-2015).

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