

AMCD Calls on Secretary Pompeo to Condemn Arrest of Christian Activists in Lebanon

The arrest of Christian activists in or from Lebanon is a targeted political move to intimidate and deter Lebanese Christian activists



Lebanese Cardinal Bechara Rai, center, patriarch of the Maronite Catholic Church, Archbishop Paul N. Sayah, left, vicar general of the Maronite Catholic Church, and Maronite Bishop Gregory J. Mansour of Brooklyn. (CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Washington DC: Today the [Philos Project held a conference](#) in New York City composed of Syriac Maronite Christians who are working to revive the ancient Aramaic language, culture, and

Aramean identity. Aramaic was the common language spoken by Jesus in the First Century.

This conference, opened by Maronite bishop Gregory Mansour, included many community delegates from the US, Canada, Europe and the Middle East. It was attended by three Maronite Christian citizens of Israel, one Maronite priest and two brothers who have a program teaching Aramaic for the Maronite communities in Israel.

One of the attendees from Sweden, Roni Doumit, visited Lebanon a couple months ago. At that time, the Lebanese authorities questioned him about contacts with any citizens from what they call the "enemy state" (Israel). The authorities took the information and let him go. Last week he went back to Lebanon and was arrested and has been jailed. The formal allegation is "facilitating the connection with citizens of the enemy state."

Another Lebanese architect, Amine Iskandar, was also called in for questioning last week. The authorities took his cell phone and asked him to come back to meet with them on July 18, 2018. After his initial questioning, he was asked to return again on July, 23. He is not sure what will happen and what kind of allegation will throw at him.

"Lebanese law forbids Lebanese citizens from visiting Israel or being in contact with Israeli authorities. It does not specifically forbid citizens from attending international conferences which happen to be attended by citizens from Israel," explained AMCD Secretary, Rebecca Bynum. "Mr. Doumit, a joint Swedish-Lebanese citizen, and Mr. Amine Iskandar, a Lebanese citizen, belong to the Maronite community and were attending a conference organized by the Maronite community. It was chaired by a Maronite Bishop who is under the authority of the Maronite Patriarch in Lebanon, who himself has visited Jerusalem in 2014."

“Besides,” added AMCD President, John Hajjar, “a world Maronite Conference in Rome has included dozens of Maronites living in Israel, who mingled with Maronites from Lebanon openly. Among the Maronites who attended that conference, there are many politicians who live in Lebanon. No one has questioned them for the past 18 years.”

“Even more,” he continued, “the New York Conference was attended by a number of Lebanese citizens, including an adviser to President Aoun of Lebanon, who himself met with the three Israeli citizens at the conference. And he was not questioned in Beirut. And last but not least, members of the Druze community of Israel often meet with Druze leaders from Lebanon either in Lebanon or Jordan or other parts in the Middle East, and Lebanese authorities do not bother them.”

We further observe that former Knesset member and Israeli citizen, Azmi Bishara, frequently travels to Lebanon for meetings including with officials. He was never questioned.

This and more, is evidence that the arrest of Christian activists in or from Lebanon, at the hands of the Lebanese security agencies, is a targeted political move to intimidate and deter Lebanese Christian activists who are working on reviving their language, the language of Jesus Christ, and defending the historical and cultural identity of the Lebanese Christian community. The two persons arrested, or about to be charged, have nothing to do with Lebanese-Israeli relations and are -as evidence would show- dedicating their lives to Christianity.

It is hoped that the Lebanese Foreign Minister Bassil will be confronted on this issue and asked how it is he can attend an event to advance religious freedom when his government is arresting Christians for the “crime” of meeting with other Maronite Christians from Israel? Why is it that only the Christians of Lebanon are being oppressed in this way?

AMCD implores Secretary Pompeo to demand the immediate release of Mr. Doumit and that Lebanese authorities cease their interrogation of Mr. Iskandar. AMCD further hopes that Secretary Pompeo will demand the full implementation of the UN Human Rights Declaration regarding the freedom of speech and freedom of assembly – even threatening to withhold US aid until this is achieved.

Furthermore, AMCD contacted members of congress and the appropriations committee in charge of funding for foreign aid to make sure funding will be reconsidered if this situation is not resolved immediately.

The Maronite Patriarch was also informed of the situation, as were other Lebanese politicians.