

Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting

Freedom of Religion or Belief: Issues, Opportunities, and the Specific Challenges of Combating Anti-semitism and Intolerance and discrimination against Christians, Muslims and Members of Other Religious

STATEMENT BY THE DELEGATION OF GREECE

Session IV

The dialogue between Cultures and Religions is of great importance for the Hellenic Republic and the Minister of Foreign Affairs M. Kotzias who has a great interest for all initiatives in that domain.

In this framework please allow me to present to you briefly our initiatives in this domain and more precisely the results of the 1st International Conference on “Religious and Cultural Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East”, as well as the planned for October 2017, 2nd Conference.

- The 1st International Conference on “Religious and Cultural Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East”, held in Athens from 18 to 20 October 2015, dealt with the urgent humanitarian crisis which are currently facing religious communities and cultural entities in the Middle East region caused by ongoing conflicts, tensions and extremism.
- The participants in the Conference, Patriarchs and Primate of Christian Churches, religious leaders of the Muslim and Jewish world, as well as other prominent religious personalities, representatives of international politics, academic communities and civil society, expressed their concern about the unprecedented humanitarian situation and condemned human rights violations and acts of terrorism and violent extremism perpetrated against religious and cultural communities in the context of the protracted conflicts in the area, especially in Syria and Iraq.
- The Conference sought to contribute to raising awareness of these pressing issues and enhance international efforts for the immediate humanitarian relief of these communities, their protection from violence, persecution and discrimination, their safe voluntary return and resettlement in their ancient cradles.
- Participants stressed that every effort should be made to urgently stop the conflicts and to ensure respect of fundamental rights and religious freedom of these communities, as well as their right to remain to their ancestral land, where they have maintained a constant presence for thousand years, defending universal values such as tolerance, multiculturalism, pluralism and peaceful coexistence.
- The Conference provided an opportunity to discuss initiatives that contribute to enhance unity against violence in the name of religion or caused by intolerance to cultural pluralism, with the

aim to support religious and cultural diversity in the region and establish a dialogue founded on the principles of mutual understanding and cooperation. The participants shared testimonies, interreligious experience and best practices.

- Plenary discussions also focused on ways to restore damaged infrastructure, improve health education and living conditions of these communities in terms of dignity, participation and mutual understanding, and promote development in the region after the end of crisis.

- Furthermore, the deliberate destruction and looting of religious and cultural heritage assets such as churches, mosques, religious shrines and sites, monuments and museums in the region was strongly condemned and support was provided to every effort ensuring the effective protection of these cultural treasures.

- Participants also highlighted the need to remain vigilant and exchanged ideas on a Greek proposal for the establishment of a follow up mechanism in Athens.

- This proposal resulted in the creation of the Center of Religious Pluralism in the Middle East which is based in Athens and examines the situation, in terms of freedom of religion or belief and cultural pluralism, codifies the various problems and elaborates concrete proposals and viable solutions.

- The Center has already participated in several events, like :

- The “4th Arab-European Young Leaders Forum (AEYLF IV)”, 4-9 December 2016, Doha, Qatar, Organized by Austria and League of Arab States in co-operation with the host country Qatar
- “The Importance of Pluralism for Developing Societies”, 10-12 December 2016, Alexandria, Egypt, Organized by the Swedish Institute Alexandria
- “Dialogue for Improved Regional Mechanisms for Conflict Prevention”, 2-4 April 2017, Alexandria, Egypt, Organized by the Swedish Institute Alexandria

In this context, the Minister of the Hellenic Republic M.Kotzias wish to further reinforce the already great dynamic created by the Conference of October 2015 in order to achieve even more concrete results in the above mentioned domains. That is why Greece with the support of Austria and the United Arab Emirates will organize in Athens, in October 2017 the «2nd Conference on Religious and Cultural Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East».

The 2nd Athens International Conference on “Religious and Cultural Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East” should have a lasting impact by further examining the situation, in terms of freedom of religion, tolerance and pluralism, codifying the various problems and elaborating concrete proposals and viable solutions, concerning :

1. Role of religious communities and leaders in the reception and integration of refugees and migrants.

2. Role of religious communities and leaders in shaping the development of policies related to refugees and migrants.
3. Role of religious communities and leaders in post-war, reconstruction era in Syria, particularly in community rehabilitation and reconciliation and in the re-building of interreligious, interethnic balance.
4. Adoption of a set of principles for promoting religious co-existence, tolerance and pluralism.
5. The study of a protective framework for small “endangered” religious communities in the region, who are facing the threat of extinction.
6. The creation of a depository of all relevant international and regional initiatives that promote religious tolerance and co-existence in order to reach synergies and avoid counter-productive overlapping.