



CRPME Report on 2nd Athens International Conference on

Religious and Cultural Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East Athens, 30-31 October 2017

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CENTRE FOR RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST- CRPME



www.crpme.gr

Akadimias 3, 10671, Athens, Greece

Phone: (+30) 210 3682130

email: info@crpme.gr

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Executive Summary

The objective of this report is to highlight the main themes featured in the speeches of the participants of the 2nd Athens International Conference on “Religious and Cultural Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East”, which took place from 30 to 31 October 2017. The conference aimed at overviewing main features and developments of religious pluralism in the Middle East in the past two years and proposed positive initiatives to promote religious coexistence and pluralism in the region. Among the points raised were the following five:

1. Review of the Status of Religious Pluralism in the Middle East

The participants of the conference emphasized the fact that despite the Islamic State’s projected defeat, the situation for religious communities in the region remains volatile. It was stressed that religion is being exploited by certain groups in order to perpetrate violence. However, these actions have little to do with religion itself, but are rather a product of misguided understanding or the pursuit of political objectives. Christians and Yazidis have been especially affected by persecution. They have been victims of genocide and the destruction of their cultural and religious heritage. Nonetheless, the participants stressed the importance of equally taking into account the fate of the Baha’i, Jewish and Muslim communities, which have also experienced a massive uprooting from their homelands and taken to looking for refuge in Europe or elsewhere.

2. Counter-Radicalisation

Conditions and ideologies that gave rise to an expression of religious extremism such as the Islamic State are still very much in existence. Therefore, the participants of the conference agreed that it is of utmost importance to demonstrate a commitment to address the root causes of radicalisation and its underlying ideas and beliefs, by

implementing suitable initiatives and policies. It has been noted that the focus should be placed on youth, and that education is at the core of effective counter-radicalisation strategies. More inclusive approaches to education, emphasizing universal human values and instilling the necessity for mutual respect in an interconnected world, should be employed. Alongside education, it is equally important to address socio-economic issues, due to the fact that a lack of prospects will render disenchanted youth in the region vulnerable to extremist ideas. Another point that has been raised in this context is the need for Western societies to re-evaluate their perception of the Middle East and the Muslim World in order to tackle islamophobia, which is an obstacle to mutual trust-building.

3. Media and Religious Discourse

Particular importance has been attributed to the question how hate speech and incitement to violence via the media can be combatted. The conference participants stressed the need for a responsible use of the media, especially of modern forms such as social media, in order to establish a pluralistic discourse and foster a culture of tolerance. It has been mentioned repeatedly that religious leaders play a pivotal role in this context. By proactively addressing hateful commentary, debunking inaccurate information about religious teachings, avoiding divisive rhetoric and cultivating a climate of tolerance, these issues can be effectively tackled. In terms of legislative measures, there has been a call for the imposition of penalties for inciting violence against religious groups and hate speech.

4. The Preservation of Cultural Heritage

In addition, the issue of the destruction and illegal trafficking of the cultural heritage of religious communities has been raised. The conference highlighted the need for initiatives aimed at rebuilding and restoring religious monuments and places of

worship that have fallen victim to devastation. The significance of religious cultural heritage was identified as being essentially twofold: Firstly, the material cultural heritage associated with religious communities is a visible testament to their role in shaping the society of their countries of residence. Secondly, its preservation serves to welcome back those who have fled from persecution, for without the infrastructure to practice their faith the exodus of members of religious communities from certain areas is likely to be an irreversible one.

5. International Interfaith and Interreligious Endeavours

Intercultural and interreligious dialogue was identified by the conference participants as being the most appropriate means for the rapprochement between different religious communities and for bridge-building between them. It has been mentioned that religious leaders should actively take part in existing interfaith dialogue initiatives and the promotion of new ones, and that honest dialogue is the key to more extensive cooperation, the fostering of mutual understanding, the promotion of social cohesion and the prevention of religious extremism.

Review of the Status of Religious Pluralism in the Middle East

The 2nd Athens International Conference reviewed the main developments of the current status of religious pluralism in the Middle East. Despite the Islamic State's decrease of power, resources and territory in the region, the situation in the Middle East remains worrisome, maintaining a *status quo* of fear and insecurity among all the religious components. The distressing situation stems from the continuing hate-rhetoric that exists vis-a-vis the "other" religious communities in the region, which are being affected by ongoing war. One of the strongest messages of the participants was that religion is being instrumentalised and abused to produce hatred and violence in the name of God to meet political ends. A violence that has led to the destruction of the mosaic of the region, not only its indigenous diverse communities, but also the cultural and religious heritage, as there is the systematic targeting of religious symbols and places of worship.

The Islamic State's genocide against the Christian and Yazidi communities has rendered these religious communities of great concern. A number of participants underlined that the consequences of these atrocities are evident as the indigenous Christian communities are disappearing from their own land. The constant assault on churches, monasteries and Christian symbols, which are the centre of Christians' lives, is further exacerbating the situation of Christians in the Middle East. Similarly, the issue of the Yazidis was addressed. Six thousand Yazidi women fell in the hands of the Islamic State, many of whom are still missing, while a large number of Yazidis have also fled beyond the region for refuge. This is not to say that deep concern was not expressed for other communities, such as the Baha'is and other religious communities, who are also persecuted. These are alarming signs for the current situation of religious pluralism in the Middle East. The on-going war in the region, which has had equally devastating consequences on the Muslim population, who are also being uprooted from their homeland and look for refuge in Europe and elsewhere, were also mentioned.

The current demographic change in the character of the Middle East and the homogenisation of the Middle East was another important issue that the participants expressed their concern for. In turn, this raised the issue of the thousands of indigenous communities to the Middle East, be they Christian, Yazidi, Muslims and others, that are not able to return to their homeland, given the current situation. A number of participants further referred to the non-existent Jewish communities in the region, beside Israel, which is also indicative of the risk of the waning diversity.

As the participants mentioned in various instances, the consensus regarding the review of the status of pluralism is that the victims of the surge of violence and extremism that took over the Middle East are neither a result of a clash of civilizations nor a historic phenomenon, but rather a result of poverty, corruption and failure of religious and national education system within the region.

Counter-Radicalisation

Conference participants stressed that the decline and territorial retreat of ISIS should not lead to premature exultation and a renewed idleness. The projected defeat of ISIS will not bring to an end the conditions and ideologies that gave rise to this expression of religious extremism in the first place. Hence, initiatives and policies that address the root causes of radicalisation and the underlying ideas and beliefs that favour extremism are of foremost importance and they should be promoted with the highest priority.

In this regard, it was underlined that the youth should be at the core of the efforts to prevent the re-emergence and prevalence of religious extremism. The «Youth Cooperation for Peace – Building Bridges to Counter Radicalization and Extremism» conference, a Cypriot initiative that will take place in December 2017, the “World Youth Forum”, which was scheduled to take place in November 2017 in Egypt, and the “Young Mediterranean Voices Programme”, which is sponsored

by the Anna Lindh Foundation, are examples of positive initiatives that try to tackle the issue of youth radicalisation, among other issues.

In order to counter extremist ideas, the political and religious leadership should re-approach the young people and try to educate and re-educate them. However, as one participant warned, this should be done in a manner that breaks free from the paternalistic approaches of the past; instead, they should try to listen and understand the problems that the youth face. There are two main directions that this rapprochement should follow: firstly, civil and religious education, and secondly, political and socio-economic solutions to problems that give rise to grievances and disenchantment.

The issue of education is multifaceted and multidirectional. As several participants noted, it is not only Middle Eastern societies and Middle Eastern youth that need re-education. Western societies are equally in need of a re-evaluation of their perception of the Middle East and the Muslim World, so that instances of islamophobia and islamophobic beliefs are eradicated in their dealings with people from the region and refugees in Western countries. Moreover, given that a significant number of those who perpetrate violent crimes come from Western backgrounds, the Western educational systems should have a sober look at their mistakes and shortcomings, as well.

In general, as several participants highlighted, there is a need for refocusing educational programs and overall discourse back to the human being, and as one participant pointedly remarked, towards a culture of life and not that of death. Universal human values should be extensively featured in textbooks, which have to be neutralised from all dismissive references to other religious communities. At the same time, mutual respect should become the bedrock of the learning process and, whenever possible, joint classes with pupils of Muslim, Christian and other religious backgrounds should be promoted.

The role of religious leaders is of paramount importance in this regard. Many participants stressed that extremism is the result of a misguided understanding of religious teachings or of the manipulation of religion for nefarious purposes. In this light, religion that was supposed to bring peace has become a vehicle for bigotry and religious exclusiveness. However, religion is a “moral compass”, as one participant noted, and it is the responsibility of religious leaders to tune the compass to the right direction; towards humanity and away from beliefs of supremacy. In the heart of this effort lies an understanding, as highlighted by one participant, that in an interconnected world respect for other ideas is the only way to preserve one’s truth and not to fanaticise one’s truth; otherwise, we are bound to rebuild a new - horizontal- Babel. These values and ideas should be expressed loudly and clearly because fanatical interpretations of religious beliefs are always louder. For this reason, as many urged, apart from traditional channels, a counter-narrative against hate speech should be propagated through new mediums, such as social media, which are more suitable for reaching the young people.

Many participants warned that education and a proactive engagement with those at risk for radicalisation should go hand in hand with measures that address the grievances that allow extremist ideas to take root. Radicalisation is an expression of the disenchantment and anger simmering for a long time among the young people in the Middle East. The prevalent feeling that they are on the losing side of globalisation and the socio-economic changes globalisation entails, pushes the young people to revolt against perceived injustices and the lack of prospects. Hence, concrete steps that address unemployment are central in the quest for a secure and prosperous society. The demand for dignity and a meaningful life is a legitimate right that young people everywhere in the world should enjoy. If left unanswered, the social fabric will continue to shred.

Furthermore, as many stressed, the preservation of social cohesion and the consolidation of a climate of trust and respect depend on efforts on the part of Middle Eastern countries towards the prevalence of the rule of law. In this light,

there is a need for laws that penalise extremists that promote violence. However, as one speaker in the workshops that were organised during the conference said, violence does not always have to be violent. Legal and institutional discrimination might have an equally damaging result, as on the one hand, it legitimises hate speech and violence against members of different religions and, on the other hand, it treats the latter as second-class citizens. This creates a second layer of incentives for religious minorities to leave their ancestral homes. Changing the discourse from “minorities” to “integral components” of their societies is a step in the right direction, but there is also a need for a legal framework that protects and treats non-dominant religious communities and non-believers as equals, as another workshop speaker added. In this regard, the issue of justice was central in the speeches of the participants, who highlighted that without justice there can be no trust-(re)building and without justice there can be no peace.

Media and Religious Discourse

Religious discourse in the post-modernist era has been radicalised. Its essence and its outreach have changed. It has been transformed into a powerful weapon for manipulation and for consolidating stereotypical images for adherents of other religions or denominations, in other words of the “other”. One of the ways for spreading religious discourse is the media, be it the more “traditional” channels of communication, such as TV, radio and newspapers, or modern, such as the internet and the social media. The participants in the 2nd Athens International Conference on “Religious and Cultural Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East”, have insightfully remarked the importance of this means of communication for enhancing and consolidating a better mutual understanding between various religious faiths and for intercepting the growth of religious hatred and persecution.

The rise of a populist rhetoric in the media, both in the West and the East, has been underlined by the participants in the conference. This rhetoric is being

disseminated either by a blatant racist manner, or by using historical and emotional invocations to achieve the glorification of one religious community over the other. This “divide and rule” method, which is very common in the context of the Middle East, brings wide instability in the Middle Eastern societies. Endless victimisation from certain religious communities or denunciation by other ones, breeds the theory of the clash of civilizations, which is condemned by all political and religious leaders in the conference. What also helps the consolidation of an anti-pluralistic discourse is the lack of valid and non-emotionally charged information. The media often portray certain religious communities with malign characteristics that harm the unity of each nation. Thus, it is obvious that in the public sphere and in the public discourse there is a lack of a culture of tolerance. The cultivation of such a culture is an imperative demand by all sides.

This “tolerance” culture should be definitely framed with the opening of more channels of cultural communication and inter-religious education. By having a more open and tolerant media environment, distorted enactments of the religious “other” could vanish and a better mutual understanding could be built. A commonplace for all the participants at the 2nd Athens Conference was that the global media should insist on the historical and cultural polymorphism of the Middle Eastern societies and that this mosaic of religions, languages and notions in the region is what gives it such an important historical significance. Furthermore, this understanding and constant open dialogue will further foster political and economic stability and will open the road for peaceful coexistence in the Middle East. As many of the speakers noted, the religions and denominations of the region do not constitute the source of hatred and of the general conflict; they are (and should always be) part of the solution. Nevertheless, religious leaders should have a more energetic and lively role in this process, since the initiatives should not take place just in addressing the problem verbally, but should be transformed into tangible actions.

Another dimension of the discourse regarding the role of the media and religious pluralism in the Middle East is the creation in the most commonly used

channels of communication, such as the internet and social media, of an anti-narrative vis-à-vis the dissemination of the hatred speech used with an effective religious mantle. This anti-narrative initiative should be spread throughout the means of communication, such as television and radio programmes and popular pages on the internet. This discourse will give to all the representatives of religious bodies equal broadcasting time and should be the basis and the platform for a genuine interreligious dialogue. This dialogue, the speakers noted, should have as its core the discussion and the peaceful solving of traditional and new emerging problems, avoiding the accusation and the marginalisation of certain ethnic and religious groups.

The political and religious leaders agreed that the context of this discourse should include elements of intercultural exchanges in the historical past but also in the present, since culture and tradition are the most important platforms for mutual understanding that aims at peaceful coexistence between religious communities. Many speakers, especially political representatives underlined the need to enrich this anti-narrative with the discussion of notions that sometimes are used in a wrong way. For instance, the notion of minority which is commonly used for the Coptic Christian community in Egypt, or the Christian denominations in Iraq and Syria, is widely rejected by the political and religious authorities. The term “minority” is rejected because it brings some connotations that are linked to communities with less political and social rights. This should not be the case for the countries in the Middle East, so political leaders choose the term citizenship as an equal and a full endorsing term to describe the desirable status and bring every community within a country at the same level of representation and citizenship. This should be an important step since the media in the Middle East often host religious personalities that still insist that different religions than Islam should be regarded as “dhimmis” and be protected appropriately as they had historically been as *ahl al kitab* (people of the book).

What is also important to note at this point, is the suggestion from some representatives, that the media environment should be protected by an anti-hatred legislation in countries that appear to have a constant and insistent hatred speech phenomena. This anti-hatred legislation should stipulate escalating penalties for those that incite by any means religious, racist or sectarian violence and that disseminate discourse of religious hatred content. This legislation framework has been used in some countries in Europe and, as some noted in the 2nd Athens Conference, it could be also effective in the Middle Eastern context.

The Preservation of Cultural Heritage

An additional aspect that was not overlooked by the participants during the Athens Conference is the one regarding the cultural heritage of the religious communities in the Middle East. While the plight of religious communities is often emphasised in regard to the respect of their religious rights as well as their status as citizens within society, a light was also shined by a majority of the participants on their cultural presence or the lack thereof. In other words, the participants highlighted that cultural heritage is intricately intertwined with its religious community. Even when a religious community is presently missing from a society, the maintaining of its cultural heritage is a testament to its past presence as well as its part in the development of the very fabric of a society.

Furthermore, a number of participants deemed imperative to identify the causes of the withering of religious cultural heritage within society rather than merely deal with its easily recognisable symptoms. Necessary measures would need to be implemented as a safeguard against its undermining and its relegating to the fringes of everyday life. What is more, through the actions of the Islamic State, the destruction of houses of worship, cemeteries and cultural houses have been highlighted, and have given way to fostering dialogue, synergy and cooperation when promoting initiatives aiming at rebuilding and restoration. Muslims, Yazidis,

Arameans, Druze, and Christians, among others, have borne the brunt of this hindering of both their cultural heritage, their place in society, as well as their religious identity. The participants stressed that the objective for maintaining the cultural home of a religious community that has left or has been forced to flee its country is twofold. On the one hand, it is necessary for preserving the historical impact that the community had on the development of a country's society. On the other hand, it could be used as a symbol or, in other words, a beacon of light for the religious communities to be invited to return and to become once again a part of their country's religious mosaic.

A number of participants underlined that if religious refugees lack homes, schools and houses of worship to return to, then their exodus will most likely be an irreversible one, directly impacting the synthesis of the religious diversity of the Middle East. Additionally, the actions of the Islamic State and the illegal trafficking of cultural artefacts have effectively robbed Syria and Iraq of their cultural religious history, and have, at the same time, removed part of the stimulus for the religious refugees to reassess their integral status in a country's society. Whereas a number of participants agreed that the defeat of the Islamic State seems nowadays to have an end in sight, it was underlined that steps must be taken in order to, first, ensure that religious coexistence and freedom of religion are respected via the establishment of dedicated institutions and policies, and second, to repair the damage inflicted upon the ties of the religious communities with their respective societies.

To that effect, a number of proposals from the participants regarding the preservation of cultural heritage were suggested throughout the Conference. The Permanent Representative of Greece to the Council of Europe, Professor Stelios Perrakis, solely in his academic capacity, proposed the establishment of a mechanism deeply rooted in International Law and supported by the international community that would guarantee the right of freedom of religion and free access to houses of worship. The latter would effectively be considered as part of the common heritage of mankind, akin to the "Area" or outer space, free from the limitations of state

sovereignty and maintaining the status quo. Moreover, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Cyprus, H.E. Ioannis Kasoulides proposed the creation of a permanent fund under international supervision that would aim at rebuilding institutions from the ground up and ensure that the principles of freedom of religion and religious coexistence are secured and imbued within society. Furthermore, following up on the “Convention on Offences relating to Cultural Property” or “Nicosia Convention” of the Council of Europe, emphasis was given to the necessity for the participants to sign it in order to counter the Islamic State’s main source of funding through illegal cultural and religious artefact trafficking.

International Interfaith and Inter-religious Endeavours

During the proceedings of the conference, many participants addressed the phenomenon of the Christian Exodus from the Middle East, and raised the issue of the return of refugees, migrants and internally displaced persons to their homeland. The repatriation of Christian refugees was urged, particularly due to the alarming decrease of the Christian population. Christianity was deemed an essential part of the regional identity, but some participants underlined the fact that soon there might not be a significant Christian population in their historical cradle. The end of hostilities in the Middle East was underlined by a number of participants as the most important condition for the repatriation of Christians and refugees in general. Some practical solutions were proposed, such as creating a legal framework condemning all transactions of property sales in conflict zones as illegal, in order to assist those wishing to return to their homes. Others urged the international community to support states, like Iraq, that wish to repatriate their citizens. Furthermore, the need to address the reasons that led to the dislocation of Christians from the region was highlighted. The participants stressed that freedom of religion and practice must be guaranteed for all religious communities, as well as the access to their respective Holy Lands, in order to secure the presence of different religions in the region, and

to avoid the pitfall of “exclusivity”. Some participants urged the international community and wealthier countries to find practical solutions for the return of the Christian refugees and to safeguard the peaceful coexistence in the region.

What is more, the need for humanitarian aid provided to refugees, whether by organising or assisting existing networks or by funding non-Governmental Organisations, was also mentioned during the conference. Some participants referred to the spiritual responsibility of the religious leaders as well as the moral duty of the political authorities to help refugees regardless of their religion, particularly in the countries that are considered receiving countries, as means to promote mutual respect and peaceful coexistence.

A number of participants addressed the so-called “Christians Massacre” in the Middle East. Many called for the end of crimes against Christians and Christianophobia, claiming they should be treated by religious leaders as serious phenomena. In addition, a few the participants accused the United Nations and other international organisations of not doing enough to protect religious minorities, and more specifically, the murder of Christians. There was also a call for more reports focused on the crimes against the Christian communities, claiming that Christians do not receive the attention they should; however, others declared that we should address the issue as a whole, and not to put disproportionate attention to the Christian communities, in order to safeguard the existence of all communities in the Middle East. Moreover, a participant claimed that the Western tendency to take Christian communities under its custody has colonialist overtones. At the same time, the rising anti-Semitism and Islamophobia worldwide, and specifically in the West, led the participants to call for further interreligious dialogue.

Furthermore, a number of participants highlighted the need to recreate the social fabric in some areas where pluralism and coexistence have been severely damaged. They underlined that a culture of tolerance must be cultivated as the only way to safeguard peaceful coexistence. A participant claimed that there must be

mutual respect and honest dialogue between followers of different religions, and the people's relation with their religion should be the basis of understanding each other. What is more, dialogue was recognised as the most appropriate means for the rapprochement of the different religious communities and for bridging their differences, in order to live together again in peace. In addition, the ancient pluralism of the Middle Eastern societies was praised as an inherent value, while branding intolerance in the region as an alien, "imported" concept that threatens coexistence. In addition, some of the participants rejected the term minority for the Christians of the Middle East, implying an inferior status, but preferred to see them as citizens with the same rights as the other religious communities. A number of participants emphasized their belief that Christians and Muslims are brothers and sisters and that they are supposed to be working together and be treated as equals.

What is more, condemning the use of violence was portrayed as a collective responsibility by many of the participants. They urged the international community to take a clear stance against terrorism. It was pointed out that the crimes against humanity must not be forgiven, and that the International Court of Justice should condemn them. Other participants advocated the support of the states that are actively fighting extremists in their region, such as Iraq or Egypt. What is more, the responsibility of the religious authorities to condemn violence was also highlighted by a number of participant, including religious figures; it was claimed that religious leaders should be aware that they are representing their institutions and their people when taking a public stand, and that, as they influence public opinion, they should repeat their condemnation of the use of violence. Furthermore, it was highlighted by a number of participants that all three monotheistic religions reject the murder of people in the name of God, and that every spill of blood should be treated as fratricide by the religious authorities. In addition to condemning violence, some participants urged the religious leaders to actively promote and take part in interfaith dialogue initiatives.

Another topic that was raised during the conference was the value of true dialogue, being capable of changing the flow of history. Interfaith dialogue was praised for having the power to further cooperation, to teach mutual respect, to promote social cohesion and to deter radicalisation that often lead to extremism. Many participants urged the religious authorities to work towards this direction, and congratulated those who are already actively involved in interfaith initiatives. Some participants shared their experiences from interfaith dialogue initiatives and gave examples of successful endeavours, in order to prove that interfaith dialogue is effective. A participant underlined that only dialogue could bridge the gap between West and East. However, the fact that dialogue needs patience and training was also addressed by another participant.

The need to strengthen dialogue efforts was also underlined during the conference by a number of participants. It was pointed out that dialogue tends to gain ground as a way to promote change, and numerous events that had already taken place were mentioned. However, the need to make more efforts towards this direction was stressed by most participants. Many participants also expressed their gratitude towards the Greek Government for hosting this event, claiming it was unique in its kind, and praising it as an important step towards further cooperation. In addition, dialogue was characterised by a participant also as an important democratic value, as everyone is heard during this process. Moreover, a number of participants called for more participation from civil society, as well as religious and political leaders coming from the Middle East, as well as to create a new framework in which there could be more interaction between the political and religious leaders, in order to conduct a more fruitful dialogue. Finally, the responsibility of the countries to strengthen existing dialogue initiatives and promote new ones was underlined by a number of participants.



Centre for Religious Pluralism in the Middle East

Coordinator
Sotirios Roussos

Researchers
Zakia Aqra
Stavros I. Drakoularakos
Marina Eleftheriadou
Charitini Petrodaskalaki
Ihab Shabana
Melina Tsiamos

www.crpme.gr
Akadimias 3, 10671, Athens, Greece
Phone: (+30) 210 3682130
email: info@crpme.gr