

Report

Special High-Level Meeting with Religious Leaders (Brussels, 19 December 2023) - "The situation in the Middle East and its impact on the European Union"

Vice-President Margaritis Schinas underlined that the situation created since the 7 October attacks and the war in Gaza show the need to recall fundamental values of human dignity. Recent events have led to an unprecedented level of hate based on religion and racism which have nothing to do with genuine religious beliefs.

The role of religious leaders is essential in this respect. The calls for moderation and peace from religious leaders are most welcome in this context. The Article 17 dialogue can be a place to address these issues and find ways to promote tolerance and reconciliation.

The European Union has condemned the terrorist attacks by Hamas, calling for the unconditional release of hostage and the need to protect civilians and respect humanitarian law. The EU is calling for a continued engagement between Israel and its neighbours to promote peace in the region. The EU remains committed to the protection of the Holy Sites and promoting peaceful coexistence between Christians, Jews and Muslims. This was the message he brought when visiting the region in June 2023. Engagement with religious and faith communities is essential to a post-war effort, in particular by upholding the multicultural and multireligious nature of Jerusalem.

Within the European Union, we have witnessed a shocking rise in hate in particular against Jews and Muslims following the 7 October attacks. In response to this, the Commission has adopted on 6 December 2023, a communication 'No Place for Hate' outlining ways to address rise in hate in Europe, such as protecting places of worship, fighting the spread of hate and terrorist content online. Education is also essential to prevent hate propaganda.

Sven Koopmans, EU Special Representative for the Middle East Peace Process, underlined that religious leaders have an important role to play in the Peace Process. The conflict is not religious in essence, but religion plays a role. Religious freedoms are also affected by the conflict and religion is often abused as a justification to victimise others. The EU has launched in September 2023 with partners (Arab League, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan) an initiative called the 'Peace Day Effort' which aims at providing incentives and a support package to the Palestinians and Israelis to reach a peace agreement. He underlined the importance to work with regional partners. S. Koopmans explained the work undertaken with religious leaders in the Holy Land, including establishing a diplomatic platform to promote protection of religious and cultural heritage.

Frans van Daele, Special Envoy for the promotion of Freedom of religion or belief outside the EU, considered that the current situation is characterized by the undermining of international law and, as a result, there seems to be no short-term solution to the current conflict. In this context, dialogue is essential and the European religious leaders have a specific role to play given their distance but also the privileged links with local religious communities. It remains essential to protect places of worship and religious sites, regardless of the evolution of the conflict. With regards to hate speech, the EU has instruments to address it with the Digital Services Act and the EU can thus take an active role in the

fight against hate, including in its engagement with external partners (such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation).

The introductory remarks were followed by an open discussion with religious leaders on three topics: situation in the Middle East from the point of view of Churches and religious communities; impact on the European Union, in particular the rise in hatred and intolerance; possible follow-up actions within the EU and in the Middle East.

1) Situation in the Middle East from the point of view of Churches and religious communities

All leaders present in the meeting agreed that the current conflict is not religious in nature, while acknowledging the manipulation of religion and the narrative used by some actors conflating religion and hate. All the leaders condemned the terrorist acts carried out by Hamas on 7 October 2023 (including hostage taking). Religious leaders considered that the war is having a devastating impact on thousands of civilians in the Gaza strip, including children.

The issue of the actual implementation of general humanitarian principles on the ground was pointed out as well as the need for a dialogue between the parties, which will be essential to rebuild Gaza and find a common political solution, as there can be no purely military solution. Some participants considered that Hamas is an obstacle to peace and to the respect of the rights of religious minorities.

Religious actors are also important actors when it comes to concrete humanitarian aid through churches and religious groups present on the ground. The importance of support to civil society and human rights actors more generally was also pointed out.

2) Impact on the European Union, in particular the rise in hatred and intolerance

Religious leaders agreed that the effect of the conflict on the EU has been dramatic. Open antisemitism becomes again acceptable recalling a dark part of European history. Antisemitism has also roots in populations with a migrant background. In this respect, the role of the Muslim Jewish Leadership Council was pointed out in view of its clear condemnation of antisemitism - as well as anti-Muslim hatred (which is fuelled by a confusion between Islam and Islamism leading to increased exclusion and risk of radicalization). Some participants pointed out the internal tensions among Muslims, leading to a fear of condemnation of Hamas and of antisemitism.

The rise of hate within the EU is putting social cohesion in question, marked by a growing polarisation of public opinion making a nuanced approach, aimed at addressing both antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred, difficult and prone to accusations of relativism.

Leaders considered that the role of the EU is essential to better control hate speech and reflected on their own role in this respect, in terms of theological conversation, of protecting religious places of worship and increasing religious literacy (at all levels, in particular among the youth). In general, education was seen as essential in preventing hate.

3) Possible follow-up actions within the EU and in the Middle East

Vice-President Schinas underlined the critical role religious leaders can play in the current context by going public with today's positive discourse of religious tolerance and understanding to counteract the voices of hate which are prevalent on the Internet.

Education is essential. It should be noted that the content of education remains a national competence – thus limiting the possibility for the EU to promote education promoting multicultural coexistence and tolerance, even if programmes such as Erasmus+ offer possibilities in this respect.

A number of actions could be considered in the coming months. First, a high-level meeting including religious leaders from the Middle East could be considered. A dedicated meeting gathering religious leaders from Europe and from the Middle East should be organized as a follow-up to today's meeting.

Second, pursue the work undertaken by Sven Koopmans on the protection of religious heritage. The work with religious leaders in the Middle East region, under the lead of Sven Koopmans and Frans van Daele should be pursued, and through the local Heads of Missions, with the possibility to develop specific funding programmes. Training programmes to promote interfaith dialogue and tolerance should also be considered.