

International Conference on Christians in the Holy Land

Speech

Your Eminencies, Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Freedom of religion was the first right to be claimed, at the end of the second century, by Tertullian, known as the “the founder of Western theology”.

The right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion has since become a universal human right, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international conventions to which the EU firmly subscribes.

The historical presence of Christians in the Middle East region has endured times of conflict and peace, destruction and reconstruction, fear of further turmoil and hope for more stability.

The rich mosaic of ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the people is a valuable heritage to be cherished. While there is ample evidence of peaceful co-existence of Jews, Christians and Muslims in the region, it is a fact that the number of Christians in the Middle East is in deep decline.

How does the EU work to ensure that all citizens, regardless of their religious beliefs, can fully enjoy their rights? What is the role that Europe and the Euro-Mediterranean partnership can play in this context? What is the potential opened by the Arab Spring and the winds of more democracy, peace and justice?

The EU firmly believes that persons belonging to religious minorities all over the world have the right to be respected as citizens of their own country. This is the call we fully support regarding Christians living in the Holy Land and in its neighbourhood.

Freedom of conscience, religion or belief belongs to everyone, it is a universal right. Whether you are a Jew, a Christian, a Muslim, or a Shik, you should live in the comfort of knowing that this belief is not the basis for intolerance or discrimination. Every state has the duty to ensure that it is respected. The EU stands ready to enhance its cooperation with governments to combat intolerance and protect human rights.

On the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief, let us never forget that the rights of those who have no religious affiliation, is a priority under the EU's human rights policy outside the Union.

The European Commission and EU Foreign Ministers have firmly responded to the increasing number of acts of religious intolerance and discrimination across the world.

In February this year, the Foreign Affairs Council - which brings together the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of EU countries - reiterated the EU's serious concern and condemnation over any intolerance, discrimination or violence as shown by recent violence and acts of terrorism in various countries, against Christians and their places of worship, Muslim pilgrims and other religious communities.

The Council expressed the EU's strong commitment to step up its efforts to promote and protect rights of persons belonging to religious minorities wherever in the world.

The EU remains committed to keeping freedom of religion or belief at the top of the EU's agenda, and to look into the best use of EU tools and instruments.

On the vulnerable situation of Christians in many countries of the Middle East, the EU will not turn a blind eye to their plight. High Representative Lady Ashton affirmed, on several occasions, that the EU condemns acts motivated by religious intolerance and extremism.

The best response to extremism is a united international front based on the universal standards of freedom of religion and belief.

We have raised the issue of freedom of religion or belief during human rights dialogues and urged countries to eradicate discrimination and intolerance.

We have mobilized our EU Delegations to analyse country situations and to take appropriate action, in coordination with EU Member States, including contacts with authorities and civil society, and funding of local projects. The EU annual human rights report, which we will issue later this year, will address progress made in this regard.

The EU is the driving force at the UN General Assembly behind the resolution on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief.

Europe makes a concerted effort every year into building that consensus, so that the international community can send a firm and united message against forces of intolerance.

=====

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let us be frank: We all have been surprised by the historic events taking place in our Southern neighbourhood since the beginning of the year. The peoples of this region have taken a courageous stand to defend their rights and to introduce democracy and social reforms.

The call for freedom, peace, and prosperity in this region is obvious. This is a window of opportunity not only for the countries and various religious communities involved, but also for the EU, which has been a beacon of freedom and prosperity for many in North Africa and the Middle East.

The EU must rise to this challenge and actively support the democratic forces to achieve these legitimate goals for and by themselves.

How have we in the EU responded since?

We have taken immediate action to adjust our policy. We have quickly shaped “A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity for the Southern Mediterranean” and have reviewed our “European Neighbourhood Policy” in the light of the changes in the region.

The key objectives of these two Communications are to provide greater support to the partners engaged in building solid and sustainable democracy.

We offer and share with our partners our experience and our assistance towards democratic reform.

We do not offer, however, a blueprint for this exercise of reform, nor do we try and impose our model. There can be no one-size-fits-all or blanket approach.

Diversity and differentiation, conditionality and mutual accountability are the key-words with our proposals, allowing each partner to tailor their relations according to their own, intrinsic needs and aspirations.

We have put forward a number of actions:

- Developing a real partnership with civil societies, not just with governments;
- Intensifying our political and security cooperation, in line with the Lisbon Treaty, which has human rights at its core;
- Promoting sustainable growth and job creation;
- Strengthening trade ties by offering greater market access;
- Enhancing co-operation in public health
- Easing mobility by the creation of mobility partnerships.

While there is not one single definition of democracy, the Communication identifies some key elements to building a deep and sustainable democracy, based on equality, inclusion and institutional and economic governance. This entails

- free and fair elections;
- freedom of association, expression and assembly and a free press and media;
- the rule of law administered by an independent judiciary and right to a fair trial;
- fight against corruption;
- security and law enforcement sector reform and
- the establishment of democratic control over armed and security forces.

These elements are the central benchmarks against which the EU will assess progress and adapt levels of support to its partners.

We will also look very carefully at another crucial and closely related element: equality and non-discrimination. Everyone is entitled to enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms, without any discrimination as to religion or belief, race, colour, gender, language or to social or other status.

There can be no real democracy without equality. The fight against all forms of discrimination in our neighbourhood must stay at the core of our approach.

We acknowledge that the engines of change and reform are being driven by people. We want to develop a real partnership with societies.

Civil society organisations and Governments must contribute to the establishing of an atmosphere where human rights are respected and economies may flourish. And equally important, an atmosphere where people may live in peace, democracy, in good health; with proper access to health services or education.

=====

Dear friends,

The Holy Land has been divided over the past 60 years. The holiest place of Christianity is located in a highly sensitive area and on disputed land.

Therefore the changes in the neighbouring Arab countries, the moves towards Palestinian reconciliation, the approaching UN General Assembly; all bring a renewed focus on the possibility of a solution and concern directly the situation of the Christian communities in the Holy Land.

Europe's foreign and security policy, has worked closely with President Abbas, Prime Minister Fayyad and Prime Minister Netanyahu in the region; and with our Quartet partners and with the Arab States to look for a strong and ambitious consensus, in which the EU plays a key role.

We do not underestimate the challenge. Just last week, on 11 July, High Representative Lady Ashton, had a substantial meeting with Quartet Principals in Washington. There are still gaps between Israelis and Palestinians that need to be bridged to come to an agreement that can allow for a return to the negotiating table and bring the parties closer to peace.

International Conference on Christians in the Holy Land

Many are looking to the September gathering of the UN General Assembly and the expected Palestinian announcement regarding statehood.

While it is up to the Palestinians themselves to choose their future fate, we as Europeans should take the time between now and September to focus our energy on getting the talks and negotiations moving. On that, the EU has a strong and united position.

On Jerusalem, the heart of the Holy Land, the EU position is clear: The EU has never recognised the annexation of East Jerusalem. Together with our Quartet partners we acknowledge that Jerusalem is deeply important for Jews, Muslims and Christians alike.

We believe that through good faith negotiations, an outcome can be found that safeguards its status for people around the world. On a practical level, the EU has continuously spoken up for free access to places of worship in Jerusalem and the West Bank.

A comprehensive Peace agreement, including Syria and Lebanon, would reopen the access to the holy places for Christians who had grown up only a few kilometres away but were cut by wars and fences over decades. A successful Peace process could hence significantly contribute to re-establish the common identity of “Christians from the Holy Land” which they had enjoyed since the beginning of Christianity.
