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Violence against Christians in the Middle East

Report¹

Political Affairs Committee

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Summary

The Parliamentary Assembly expresses concern at the rise in the number of attacks against Christian communities in the Middle East and strongly condemns the tragic events in Baghdad in October 2010 and in Alexandria in January 2011.

The co-existence of religious groups is a sign of pluralism and of an environment favourable to the development of democracy and human rights. The Assembly is convinced that the loss of Christian communities in the Middle East would also endanger Islam as it would signal the victory of fundamentalism.

It addresses member states, states in the Middle East, religious leaders and the European Union and recommends that the Committee of Ministers take a certain number of measures concerning the state of freedom of religion and related rights.

¹ Reference to Committee: Reference 3726 of 24 January 2011.

A. Draft recommendation²

1. The Parliamentary Assembly recalls that Christianity had its beginnings in the Middle East 2 000 years ago and that Christian communities have existed in the area since that time.

2. These communities, which are made up of autochthonous people, have been declining in numbers for the last 100 years, mainly due to a combination of low birth rates and emigration, which, in some places, is fuelled by discrimination and persecution.

3. The situation has become more serious since the beginning of the 21st century and, if it is not properly addressed, it could lead to the disappearance – in the short term – of Christian communities from the Middle East, which would entail the loss of a significant part of the religious heritage of the countries concerned.

4. The number of attacks on Christian communities rose worldwide in 2010, as well as the number of trials and death sentences for blasphemy, which often affect women (as in the case of Mrs Asia Bibi).

5. Relations between Christian communities in the Middle East and the Muslim majorities have not always been easy. Discrimination is reported throughout the region and extreme violence has occurred sporadically in several countries. Public authorities in some Muslim countries have not always conveyed the right signals about religious communities existing in their respective countries.

6. Two recent events were particularly tragic: on 31 October 2010, a hostage taking in the Syriac catholic Cathedral of Our Lady of Salvation in Baghdad ended in the massacre of worshippers, 58 of whom died and 75 of whom were wounded. A suicide bombing in a Coptic church in Alexandria killed 21 people and wounded 79 as worshippers were leaving midnight mass on 1 January 2011.

7. The Assembly condemns these attacks in unequivocal terms and expresses its sincere condolences to the families of the victims, its sympathy to the wounded and its solidarity with their families.

8. It recalls that freedom of thought, freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, including the freedom to change one's religion, are universal human rights, enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which every member state of the United Nations has committed to guarantee. It wishes also to draw attention to Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966, to the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion and Belief of 1981, to the reports of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, and in particular her reports of 29 December 2009, 16 February 2010 and 29 July 2010, to Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights and to Article 10 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

9. The co-existence of religious groups is a sign of pluralism and of an environment favourable to the development of democracy and human rights. The Assembly is convinced that the loss of Christian communities in the Middle East would also endanger Islam as it would signal the victory of fundamentalism.

10. It wishes to raise awareness about the need to combat all forms of religious fundamentalism and the manipulation of religious beliefs for political reasons, which are so often at the basis of present day terrorism. Education and dialogue are two important tools that could contribute towards the prevention of such evils.

11. In the light of the increasing necessity to analyse and understand the evolution of cultural and religious developments in international relations and contemporary societies, the Assembly recommends that the Committee of the Ministers:

11.1. develop a permanent capacity – in co-operation with the Commissioner for Human Rights and the Directorate General of Human Rights and Legal Affairs – to monitor the situation of governmental and societal restrictions on religious freedom and related rights in Council of Europe member states and in states in the Middle East, and report periodically to the Assembly;

11.2. develop, as a matter of urgency, a Council of Europe strategy for the enforcement of freedom of religion (including the freedom to change one's religion) as a human right, including a list of measures against states which knowingly fail to protect religious denominations;

² Draft recommendation adopted by the committee on 25 January 2011.

11.3. pay increased attention to the subject of freedom of religion or belief and to the situation of religious communities, including Christians, in its co-operation with third countries as well as in human rights reports.

12. The Assembly calls on member states:

12.1 to reaffirm that the development of human rights, democracy and civil liberties is the common basis on which they build their relations with third countries and ensure that a democracy clause is included in the agreements between them and third countries;

12.2. to take account of the situation of Christian and other religious communities in their bilateral political dialogue with the countries concerned;

12.3. to promote a policy, at national and Committee of Ministers' level, which integrates the question of the respect for the fundamental rights of Christian minorities in foreign relations;

12.4. to produce, promote and distribute educational materials addressing anti-Christian stereotypes and bias as well as Christianophobia in general;

12.5. not to encourage the members of the Christian communities in the Middle East to seek refuge in Europe, except in cases where the survival of such communities becomes impossible; in the latter cases, member states should take fully into account the recommendations of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in dealing with asylum and return issues;

12.6. to develop a comprehensive policy of asylum based on religious grounds, which would acknowledge in particular the specific situation of those who convert to another religion;

12.7. to promote policies to help relocate Christian refugees in their home countries and to support communities offering a local refuge to the Christian minorities of the Middle East;

12.8. to support initiatives aimed at promoting dialogue among religious communities in the Middle East;

12.9. to promote and facilitate relations between the Christian diasporas and their original communities.

13. Following the adoption by the European Parliament of a Resolution on the situation of Christians in the context of freedom of religion, on 20 January 2011, the Parliamentary Assembly calls on Turkey to clarify fully the circumstances surrounding the interruption of the celebration of Christmas Mass in the villages of Rizokarpaso and Ayia Triada in the northern part of Cyprus on 25 December 2010 and to bring to justice those responsible.

14. The Assembly urges Iraq and Egypt to be transparent and determined in their attempts to bring the culprits of the attacks in Baghdad and in Alexandria to justice as rapidly as possible.

15. The Assembly further urges all states in the Middle East to:

15.1. condemn unequivocally not only deadly attacks on innocent people but also the use of violence in general, as well as all forms of discrimination and intolerance based on religion and beliefs;

15.2. promote positive education about religions, including Christian minorities;

15.3. support actively initiatives aimed at promoting the interreligious dimension of dialogue.

16. The Assembly calls on all religious leaders in Europe to condemn attacks on Christian communities and other faith groups and to accept the basis of equal respect for each denomination.

17. Finally the Assembly calls on the European Union to enhance its monitoring of the situation of Christian and other religious communities in its political dialogue with the countries of the Middle East and to link its neighbourhood policy, including financial aid, to the degree of human rights protection and awareness in those countries.

B. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Volontè, rapporteur

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1. Introduction

1. The recent violent attacks against Christian communities in Baghdad and Alexandria should be seen in a wider perspective. Intolerance and violence against Christians is rising sharply: 75% of the victims of religious violence throughout the world are Christians. Some 200 million persons are persecuted simply because of their faith.

2. From December 2007 to August 2008 some 300 Christian villages in the Indian state of Orissa were attacked, resulting in the destruction of churches and private homes, the death of more than 90 Christians and the displacement of some 11 000 Christian families. In 2009 and 2010, more Christian churches were attacked in at least five other Indian states and, on 2 January 2011, a protestant pastor was severely beaten by Hindu extremists in Davanagere, Karnataka. Much of the anti-Christian violence in India is fuelled by extremist Hindu nationalism.

3. Violence against Christians is also reported in Pakistan, where a Christian mother of five was sentenced to death for blasphemy and the Governor of Punjab was murdered on 4 January 2010 for speaking against the blasphemy law; in China, in Vietnam, in the Philippines, where a bomb was set off inside a chapel on 25 December 2010; in Iran, where more than 100 Christians were arrested last month; in Gaza, where Christian shops were attacked by bombs, and in Nigeria, where dozens of civilians, mainly Christians, were killed on Christmas day 2010.

4. Europe is not free from violence against Christians either: in Turkey, a catholic priest was murdered in Trabzon in February 2006 and three Christians were killed in an attack against a Bible publishing firm in Malatya in 2007; the celebration of Christmas mass in the villages of Rizokarpaso and Aya Triada in the northern part of Cyprus was interrupted by force on 25 December 2010.

5. The situation in the Middle East is, however, particularly alarming and the Synod of Bishops convened in October 2010 in Rome to address “the urgent plight of Christians in the Middle East, particularly Iraq”. The session gathered almost all the bishops of the Middle East, representing seven eastern Catholic churches. The Synod issued an urgent call for peace in the region.

2. Background

6. Christianity started in the Middle East and Christian communities have existed there for the last 2 000 years. These are Coptic (in Egypt); Syriac, including the Church of the East – also referred to as Assyrian or Nestorian (in Syria, Iran and Iraq), the Chaldean Church (in Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Egypt and Syria), the Syrian Orthodox Church (in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq), the Syrian Catholic Church (in Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt) and the Maronite Church (mainly in Lebanon); Greek orthodox (in Lebanon, Israel, West Bank, Gaza, Syria and Jordan), Melkite (in Syria, the West Bank, Israel, Jordan and Egypt) and Armenian (in Iran and Syria).

7. These communities are not made up of immigrants, expatriates or recent converts but of autochthonous people who have lived in the region throughout the centuries.

8. In the 20th century, however, such communities declined considerably in number. The decline is due to a combination of low birth rates, emigration and, in some places, discrimination and persecution.

9. Christians are fleeing from all over the Middle East.³ Emigration began in the aftermath of the First World War and has greatly picked up in the last decade. Almost half of the 800 000 Christians who lived in Iraq in 2003 have now left. Copts began leaving Egypt in significant numbers after the 1952 revolution. For

³ See Daniel Pipes, “Disappearing Christians in the Middle East”, in *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2001.

the first time in nearly two millennia, the most identifiably Christian town on earth, Bethlehem, has lost its Christian majority.

10. As a Jordanian journalist put it recently: "If the situation continues, it will not take long to declare the Middle East – the cradle of Christianity – Christian free."⁴

11. Relations between Christian communities in the Middle East and the Muslim majorities have not always been easy. Discrimination is reported throughout the region and incidents of extreme violence have sporadically occurred. As regards more particularly Egypt and Iraq, seven people were killed in an attack against a Coptic church in Nag Hammadi, Egypt, already a year ago, in January 2010; there were 25 bomb attacks on churches in Baghdad between 2004 and 2007; the Archbishop of the Chaldean Catholic Church in Mosul, was kidnapped and killed in 2007; two priests, three deacons and ten civilians were also killed in Mosul and Kirkuk between 2005 and 2008.

12. Public authorities in some Muslim countries do not always convey the right signals about religious communities existing in their respective countries. For instance, the massive slaughter of pigs in 2009 in Egypt was clearly perceived as a measure against Egyptian Copts.

13. Already, in 2007, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on "serious events which compromise Christian communities' existence and those of other religious communities" where it expressed its extreme concern "about the proliferation of episodes of intolerance and repression directed against Christian communities, particularly in the countries of Africa, Asia and the Middle East".

14. Protection of religious communities in the Middle East should also involve the Jews, Mandeans, Zoroastrians, Bektashi, Druze, Yazidi and Baha'i and non-believers too.

15. It may be recalled that, only a few months ago, in its Resolution 1743 (2010) on Islam, Islamism and Islamophobia in Europe, the Parliamentary Assembly invited "Muslims, their religious communities and their religious leaders to combat any form of extremism under the cover of Islam. Islam is a religion which upholds peace. Muslims should be the first to react with dismay and opposition when terrorists or political extremists use Islam for their own power struggle and thus disrespect the fundamental value of human life and other values enshrined in Islam".

16. In its Resolution 1605 (2008) and Recommendation 1831 (2008) on European Muslim communities confronted with extremism, the Assembly called "on European Muslim organisations, leaders and opinion-makers to act with a high sense of responsibility in their public statements and condemn terrorism and extremism unequivocally".

17. Finally, in its Recommendation 1720 (2005) on education and religion, the Assembly underlined that "Education is essential for combating ignorance, stereotypes and misunderstanding of religions. Governments should also do more to guarantee freedom of conscience and of religious expression, to foster education on religions, to encourage dialogue with and between religions and to promote the cultural and social expression of religions".

3. Recent events

18. On 31 October 2010, a hostage taking in the Syriac Catholic cathedral of Our Lady of Salvation in Baghdad ended in the massacre of worshippers, 58 of whom died and 75 of whom were wounded. The attack was claimed by a Sunni extremist group linked to Al-Qaeda and condemned by many Muslims.

19. A suicide bombing in a Coptic church in Alexandria killed 21 people and wounded 79 as worshippers were leaving midnight mass on 1 January 2011. The attack was not claimed but the Egyptian police believe that it was perpetrated by isolated terrorists inspired by Al-Qaeda. The bomb was packed with nuts, bolts, nails and other metal objects and was designed to cause maximum harm.

4. Reactions of the international community

20. Both attacks have been strongly condemned.

21. Iraq's Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, said the Baghdad attack was an "attempt to reignite sectarian strife in Iraq and to drive more Christians out of the country." The Kurdistan Regional Government

⁴ Urayb al-Rintawi in Al-Dustour, as quoted by the BBC on 5 January 2011.

condemned the attack in a statement saying "We strongly condemn this terrorist attack on our Christian brethren in Baghdad. We send our condolences to the families of the victims and wish a speedy recovery for the wounded."

22. Iraq's top Catholic prelate, Cardinal Emmanuel III Delly, encouraged an already dwindled Christian population not to leave, while he also condemned the attack by declaring: "We have never seen anything like it, militants attacking God's house with worshippers praying for peace."

23. About three dozen survivors of the attack have found refuge in France, where they have been given temporary status as asylum seekers. French Immigration Minister, Eric Besson, said France was offering refuge to 150 victims of the attack as a gesture of friendship and support to Christians who face hardships.

24. The Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East and the Danish Ministry for Foreign Affairs organised an emergency summit of Iraqi Christian and Muslim religious leaders from 12 to 14 January 2011 in Copenhagen to look into ways of "ending the spiral of violence".

25. Egyptian President, Hosni Mubarak, said the Alexandria attack bore the hallmark of "foreign hands" seeking to destabilise Egypt. Egypt's top Muslim leaders expressed their condolences and called for unity.

26. In condemning the Alexandria attack, the President of the Assembly, Mevlüt Çavusoğlu, expressed his deep shock and extended his sincere condolences to the families of the dead as well as to the authorities of Egypt. In his view, terrorism remains the greatest threat to the universal values of human rights. He recalled that the Assembly stated recently that "the manipulation of religious beliefs for political reasons violates human rights and democratic values". He also referred to the Council of Europe which "defines as a priority the work for freedom of religion, while combating religious intolerance and discrimination as well as religiously disguised attacks against the values it upholds".

27. German Chancellor Angela Merkel condemned the 1 January 2011 bombing as "barbaric", while French Prime Minister François Fillon prayed for the victims at a church in the southern Egyptian city of Aswan, where he was on a private visit. Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi of Italy and President Nicolas Sarkozy of France – and other European leaders – also condemned very strongly both attacks.

28. On 12 November 2010, the Assembly's Standing Committee held a current affairs debate on "Recent violent attacks against Christians and other religious communities in Iraq" introduced by Mr Jean-Claude Mignon (France, EPP/CD). In December 2010, the Bureau referred the matter to the Political Affairs Committee. Meanwhile, the Group of the European People's Party requested a debate under urgent procedure on "the religious cleansing of Christians in Iraq and other regions of the World". In January 2011, the Group proposed to change the title to "Recent violence against Christians in the Middle East".

29. With a view to the Foreign Affairs Council of 31 January 2011, several Ministers for Foreign Affairs of European Union member states have approached Lady Ashton, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the European Union, for a concerted action by European Union member states.

30. Pope Benedict XVI, who had condemned the Iraqi attack as "absurd and ferocious violence", called the Alexandria attack a "vile gesture". However, the Imam of al-Azhar, Ahmed al-Tayeb, criticised the Pope's call to world leaders to defend Christians as "unacceptable interference in Egypt's affairs". On 20 January al-Azhar announced that it was suspending its twice yearly meetings with the Vatican.

31. The White House press secretary said of the Baghdad attack: "The United States strongly condemns this senseless act of hostage taking and violence by terrorists linked to Al-Qaeda in Iraq that occurred Sunday in Baghdad killing so many innocent Iraqis." Several U.S. Representatives sent a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, calling for the Obama Administration to develop a comprehensive policy for the protection of indigenous religious communities in Iraq. They also offered condolences to the victims and their families. President Barack Obama described the Alexandria attack as a "heinous act".

32. The United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, condemned the deadly church attacks. According to his spokesperson, the United Nations Secretary-General was appalled by the terrorist attack at the al-Qiddissin Coptic Church in Alexandria during the New Year's Eve festivities. He also called for the Egyptian authorities to act swiftly and bring to justice those responsible for the terror bombing. In addition, he conveyed his sincere condolences to the families of the victims.

33. The Muslim Brotherhood also strongly condemned the crime. The group stated that this crime is not accepted by any religion, and that Islam calls for the protection of the rights of non-Muslims and Muslims alike.

34. On 19 January 2011, the European Parliament held a debate on the "Situation of Christians in the context of freedom of religion" and adopted a resolution on this issue on 20 January, in which it "expresses its grave concerns about the abuse of religion by the perpetrators of terrorist acts in several areas of the world [and] denounces the instrumentalisation of religion in various political conflicts".

35. On 20 January 2011, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted a declaration strongly condemning the recent tragic events and calling for respect for freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

5. Conclusions

36. Freedom of thought, freedom of conscience and freedom of religion are universal human rights, enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which the members of the United Nations have the obligation to guarantee under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Article 18 of the Declaration states that "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance".

37. Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights states that: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance." It goes on: "Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others".

38. The Assembly should condemn in unequivocal terms not only deadly attacks on innocent people such as those in Baghdad and in Alexandria but also all forms of discrimination and intolerance based on religion and beliefs, which violate freedom of religion and freedom of conscience.

39. The Assembly should call on Turkey to clarify fully the circumstances surrounding the interruption of the celebration of Christmas Mass in the villages of Rizokarpaso and Ayia Triada in the northern part of Cyprus on 25 December 2010 and to bring to justice those responsible. It should also call on the authorities of Azerbaijan to repeal the laws that punish the religious gatherings and community prayer of Christians.

40. The co-existence of religious groups is a sign of pluralism and of an environment favourable to the development of democracy and human rights.

41. The disappearance of Christian communities in the Middle East would also endanger Islam as it would signal the victory of fundamentalism.

42. Therefore, the member states of the Council of Europe should not encourage members of the Christian communities in the Middle East to seek refuge in Europe, except in cases where the survival of such communities becomes impossible. As the Archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Church in Palestine and Jerusalem put it: "Thank you for your support but when we need protection we will ask our Muslim brothers to protect us."

43. According to the High Commissioner for Refugees, some 1 000 families have arrived in the Kurdistan region of Iraq since the beginning of November 2010. In addition, UNHCR offices in Syria, Jordan and the Lebanon report a growing number of Iraqi Christians arriving and contacting UNHCR for registration and help. Churches and non-governmental organisations are warning the refugee agency to expect more people fleeing in the coming weeks. UNHCR strongly reiterated its call on countries to refrain from deporting Iraqis who originate from the most perilous parts of the country: asylum-seekers who originate from Iraq's governorates of Baghdad, Diyala, Ninewa and Salah-al-Din, as well as from Kirkuk province, should not be returned and should benefit from international protection, whether in the form of refugee status under the 1951 Refugee Convention or a complementary form of protection.

44. The Assembly should raise awareness about the need to combat all forms of religious fundamentalism and the manipulation of religious beliefs for political reasons, which are so often at the basis of present day terrorism. Education and dialogue are two important tools that could contribute towards the prevention of such evils. In this respect, the Assembly will hold a debate on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue at its April 2011 part- session.

45. In the light of these conclusions, the Assembly should recommend that the Committee of Ministers take a certain number of measures concerning the state of freedom of religion and related rights.

46. Finally, the Assembly should voice its strong commitment to intercultural dialogue and reject allegations of a so-called “clash of civilisations.”