

ADDRESS OF H.B. PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM IN THE "ISTANBUL WORLD FORUM".

Istanbul, 14 of October 2012

Esteemed Fellow Participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we gather in this great city, the meeting point of Europe and Asia, we greet you with the peace of Jerusalem, a peace that is meant for the whole world. We are here as a testimony to history, and we acknowledge that we stand in the presence of many who have the power to make history.

Our gathering presents a precious opportunity to deepen our commitment to the common ground we share, our common human condition, and the aspiration that we all have for a better life for the entire human family.

By virtue of our standing in our communities, the positions of leadership we hold, and the knowledge we have, we are able to shape in, and evoke from, our people enduring values and commitments. From these values and commitments in them and in their children, as well as in many circles of thought and in our cultures at large, come transformative actions in all walks of life.

Our meeting is indeed important and timely. For in the world at large, and in our region, there are dramatic developments that indicate a future that is, at present, unpredictable.

Our calling is to take responsibility, each in our own circle of significant influence, to make a better history for

humanity as we live into this uncertain future. We do this primarily by choosing always to side firmly with peace, tolerance, and co-existence, and by holding fast to our common values. They are like a golden thread that connects our faiths. In these ways we can help to create the best possible future for all our peoples. Let us never underestimate the power that we have to do this.

Since we have been asked to speak from our experience, let us say this.

The Rum Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem in the Holy Land is the embodiment of the history of Jerusalem, and has existed from the very beginning of the Christianity. As part of this history, it is no exaggeration to say that the well-known Covenant of Omar has played a crucial role since the convergence of Christianity and Islam in the Holy Land for 1400 years.

In 638 CE Omar ibn Al-Khattab, who was the second Khalifa, entered Jerusalem at the head of a Muslim army. He entered the city on foot, as a gesture of humility, and there was no bloodshed. On the contrary, those who wanted to leave were allowed to do so with their possessions and were guaranteed a safe passage, while those who wanted to stay were granted protection for their lives, their property, and their places of worship. The Khalifa Omar even took steps to ensure the continued future of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre as a place of Christian worship.

This is the most authentic version of the Covenant as established by the majority of Arab and Muslim historians, and we shall read parts of it because of its significance for our conversations here:

“In the Name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate.

“This is an assurance of peace and protection given by the

servant of Allah Omar, Commander of the Believers to the people of Aelia (Jerusalem). He gave them an assurance of protection for their lives, property, churches and crosses as well as the sick and healthy and all its religious community.

Their churches shall not be occupied, demolished nor taken away wholly or in part. None of their crosses or property shall be seized. They shall not be coerced in their religion nor shall any of them be injured...

He who leaves shall be guaranteed safety for his life and property until he reaches his safe haven. He who stays shall also be safe, in which case he shall pay as much tax as the people of Aelia do.

Should any of the people of Aelia wish to move together with their property along with the Rum and to clear out their churches and crosses, they shall be guaranteed safety for their lives, churches and crosses, until they have reached their safe haven... He who wishes to move along with the Romans may do so, and he who wishes to return home to his kinsfolk may do so.

Nothing shall be taken from them until their crops have been harvested. To the contents of this Covenant here are given the Covenant of Allah, the guarantees of His Messenger, the Khalifas and the Believers, provided they (the people of Aelia) pay their due Jizya tax.

Witnesses hereto are Khaled ibn Al-Waleed, Abdul-Rahman ibn 'Auf, Amr ibn Al-'Aas and Mu'awiya ibn abi-Sufyan. Made and executed in the year 15 Hijri."

The Covenant of Omar is significant in many respects, and we shall highlight several observations:

1) The document was signed by four of the most eminent companions of the Khalifa, while traditionally just two witnesses were sufficient.

2) Though concise, the Covenant is very detailed, well organized, clear and legally ordered, leaving no space for different or conflicting interpretations.

3) The wording leaves no doubt of the great importance that Omar attached to the duty of all to abide by its provisions.

4) Most importantly, of course, the Covenant provided for rights and privileges of non-Muslims. In an all-encompassing manner it provided for basic rights and freedoms, especially:

a) The freedom of religion, the safety and protection of churches and crosses.

b) The right to life and dignity.

c) The right to property.

d) The freedoms of ordinary citizens, providing that the religious community abides by the laws of the State.

e) Full respect of other communities and the prevailing culture.

Later in our history, Salah al-Din, although he was a conqueror of Jerusalem and the Holy Land, also ruled with these principles.

So we see in the Covenant of Omar and in the attitude of many of his successors right up to the Ottoman period that this Covenant was renewed and reconfirmed by various firmans issued by the Sublime Porte. So the enduring values of the Covenant continue to be relevant to us in our day. For they have been respected and maintained by modern international agreements and by the States that have ruled the region of the Holy Land.

In conclusion, let us say this.

In light of all that our region is experiencing, the various ethnic and religious communities that have been at home in our

region and have adopted the unique culture that has emerged from the co-existence of the religious traditions of their respective communities are anxious about the future. This is so because unexpectedly their established system of governance has shifted and has caused them uncertainty. This is why many are forced to flee a region that for them is their homeland.

In our understanding, the Covenant of Omar can once again be considered as a paradigm that gives us valuable insights in the manner in which we consider the role of religion and its free expression and practice. For instance, we must always uphold the mutual respect between our various ethnic communities, communities which are in fact defined by their religious tradition.

From our historical experience as the Rum Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the Covenant of Omar has served as the basis of the ongoing life of Christians in Jerusalem and the broader area of the Middle East. We do believe that an interpretation and application to our modern world of this document can be a viable basis for understanding the relationship of religion and freedom, freedom of religious minorities, with their appropriate rights and responsibilities.

This is how we understand the interaction between religion and freedom.

The Rum Orthodox Patriarchate is prepared to continue to support any means by which such firm bases for our common life and common destiny are strengthened, and we are grateful to this Forum for allowing us to highlight our concerns and away forward to which we are committed.

Thank you.

His Beatitude

THEOPHILOS III

Patriarch of Jerusalem