

AN ADDRESS AT THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON PEACEFUL RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL COEXISTENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST SPONSORED BY THE GREEK MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS.

18-20 October 2015

Your Excellency, Mr. Kotzias

Your All-Holiness,

Your Beatitudes,

Distinguished Members of the Foreign Ministry,

Your Eminences,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We bring you greetings from the Holy City of Jerusalem and from the Christian community of the Holy Land, and we commend this conference for the attention that you are giving to the subject of peaceful religious and cultural coexistence in the Middle East. The situation throughout the region is, as we all know, one of extreme difficulty, and it is clear that ways must be found for the international community to play a decisive role in ending conflict, violence, persecution, and

destruction. The situation that we face is unprecedented in modern times, and the current violence threatens not only the viability of the countries of the region; it threatens our very identity.

We are encouraged by the fact that the Government of Greece plans to open a centre in Athens that will serve as an Observer of the state of affairs in the Middle East. This office will follow closely the situation, especially of Christians in our region, document the problems and violations that occur, find effective ways of making the true situation known more broadly around the world, and so make more possible international relief for those who are persecuted and suffering.

This is an important development. We are deeply appreciative to the Greek Government and to the Foreign Ministry for this initiative, and welcome it.

It is urgent that we find practical solutions and practical help without delay to bring real aid and assistance directly to those who are displaced and afflicted. For the numbers of people who are moving around our region are staggering, and now Europe is feeling the immediate impact of the reality that countless people believe they have no future in their homes in the Middle East. The countries of the region cannot continue to bear the pressure of so much migration.

We face an uncertain future, but this must not delay action. Of the many concerns that face us in the Middle East, at the top of our priority is the enduring integrity of our multi-cultural, multiethnic, and multi-religious landscape. We have long asserted, and continue to assert, that a vital and strong Christian presence is, and has always been, essential to the integrity and to the flourishing of the region. We have no other option than to remain steadfast and carry on our mission.

We are experiencing the reality that enormous segments of the population of a number of countries are now displaced, especially from Syria. The pressure on countries who are hosting the displaced is now unbearable at every level, especially in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. For those who are displaced, it is now practically impossible to get in or out of Jordan, for example, and among them are many Christians who are being persecuted by radical religious groups. But there are also many other religious and ethnic groups among the displaced, including Muslims, who are also being violently persecuted.

While the governments of the region and the international community search for ways to bring about peace and reconciliation in the region, in the meantime others, including the local religious leadership, have a responsibility to take action to help those in need.

Therefore we wish to make these clear suggestions to this conference, and beyond this conference, to others who have it in their power to assist in bringing aid and relief.

We are of course concerned most particularly with the children and youth among the displaced, as they are especially vulnerable. So we need not only food, but also education for the new populations of the displaced, along with the infrastructure to support them, including teachers and other staff. We also see the importance of extended school days and after-school programs to ensure that the youth of the displaced communities are occupied in worthwhile activity, and as a consequence, less susceptible to abuse, human trafficking, and recruitment into terrorist organizations.

In addition to this, there is a great need for accommodation – for housing projects. The so-called refugee camps are full, and in any case these camps are not suitable even for short-term residence. A strategy is needed to secure the kind of accommodation that is appropriate, especially for families.

Once again, we acknowledge that secure homes contribute to the general health and well-being of persons and families, and also to their stability in a community.

There is an immediate need for health clinics, as well as centers that deliver practical help in the form of job-training and other concrete steps to assist the displaced to be able to work and be otherwise usefully occupied. There are too many who are now in a cycle of chronic unemployment, with no hope for the future of their children. Many, of course are suffering from health problems either as a result of being the victims of war and violence, or as a result of the difficulties of migration, and these problems must be addressed simply from a humanitarian point of view.

As you can understand from this brief presentation, the way forward is not complicated to conceive, but it can be very difficult to implement. We say this from our own experience. Our office in Amman is completely dedicated to assisting those who have been settled in the camps, and we have been building partnerships with others in this mission whose contribution, though small and symbolic, has a great moral impact. And so we encourage people to hope.

We who make the Middle East our home strive every day to find solutions to these challenges, and this is why we need the help of the international community as never before. In this regard, we are asking for partners who will work with us, who know the situation and the population intimately, who have generations of experience and who have the ability to deliver aid directly to those most in need.

From time immemorial, the population of the Middle East has been one in which civilization has thrived, in which peoples of many faiths, cultures, traditions, and ethnicities have met, and in which peoples of many faiths, cultures, traditions, and ethnicities have lived side by side, often in close and intimate interaction. This is the true Middle East,

and once again we take this opportunity to thank all of you for the efforts you are making on behalf of all in our region – and to remind you of the words of Saint Paul who said, “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us” (Rom. 5:3-5).

May God bless this conference, and may God bring peace, through our humble efforts and cooperation, to the Middle East and all our peoples.

Thank you.

His Beatitude

THEOPHILOS III

Patriarch of Jerusalem