

# Event Summary

American College of Greece

*Address by Ms Dora Bakoyannis:*

## **“Developments in the Middle East and the Persecution of Christians”**

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear friends, And, above all, dear students, I have been asked by the Institute of Diplomacy and Global Affairs of the American College of Greece and my dear friend Mr. Adrianopoulos to talk to you about the crisis in the Middle East as far as the human tragedy, mostly of Christians there, is concerned. I have gladly accepted to do so; we are speaking about our immediate vicinity and about a humanitarian catastrophe unseen in our Region since the Second World War.

I have personally taken it upon me, I must say, to do my best, as an individual and as a politician to induce the Council of Europe, where I head the Political Committee, to act; to do something. And I have suggested we name a Rapporteur on the plight of Christians. I have been unanimously elected as that Rapporteur, and my speech to you today will be greatly based on my final Report to the Assembly of the Council of Europe.

The threatening rise of IS further adds to a humanitarian catastrophe in the Middle East already affecting around 10.8 million people in Syria alone, with many Christians and other religious communities included in the suffering there and in Iraq. The situation for religious and ethnic communities in the region is dire, and they are in desperate need of greater support.

Unfortunately Western leaders remain reluctant to involve their nations in another bloody Middle Eastern war so soon after being burned in the 2003 Iraq War. The international community must do more to alleviate the humanitarian suffering of all those affected, especially religious, ethnic communities, women and children. Thousands of people have been killed and millions have been displaced in the collision zones between the IS insurgency and the ongoing Syrian civil war.

Ladies and Gentlemen Dear students The result has been an overall decline in the Christian population of countries like Iraq, home to Christian communities for the last 2,000 years. Almost half of the 800,000 Christians there in 2003 have been forced out. IS is the latest tragedy. But Syria continues to shock the world in a motion tabled by myself and others, we refer to developments in Syria which, “have...exceeded even the worst of fears: murders, internally displaced Christians, sexual assaults, destruction of churches, murders and kidnappings of priests”. We quoted as “an outrageous manifestation of the above... the kidnapping by Syrian armed militants of two Orthodox Bishops of Aleppo, the head of the Greek Orthodox Church, and the head of the Syriac Orthodox Church, on 22 April 2013”. In October 2013, our new report on Syria found that “violence had escalated, resulting in a full-

fledged civil war and a humanitarian tragedy: more than 100,000 people have died, 2 million have taken refuge abroad, 4.25 million are internally displaced and a total of 6.8m are in need of humanitarian assistance". The dead now, a year later, exceed 140,000! More recently, I have pressed the issue of vulnerable religious communities to the fore once more at a conference on 'Freedom of religion or belief in the Middle East and the South Mediterranean: the situation and safety of Christian communities' in Athens last May. I have reminded those in attendance that the situation of Christians in the Middle East and the South Mediterranean has "dramatically deteriorated" with "one Christian suffering physical violence every five seconds". The conference acknowledged the "practical need for respect of diversity", and further recognised that economic development and education will go some way to removing the influence of religious fanaticism, providing alternatives for those considering joining the fight.

Dear friends, The militant group now known as Islamic State emerged from al-Qaeda Iraq and has existed in its current structure since April 2013. The Islamic State quickly gained notoriety for their ostentatious barbarity. The group adheres to a doctrine of total war without limits or constraints; This makes them both difficult to deal with for liberal western leaders, and inspiring to those with sympathies for their ideals.

In fact, Amnesty International accuses the group of carrying out "a wave of ethnic cleansing", and the United Nations said it was investigating "acts of inhumanity on an unimaginable scale". There is much debate over where the Islamic State receives its support. And I will not elaborate on this today. But the group could have money and assets ranging anywhere from \$900million to \$2bn! Perhaps of more concern is their claim to have at their disposal aggressive young fighters from the UK, France, Germany and other European countries, as well as the US, the Arab world and the Caucasus. The extremist ideological stance of IS seems to have had a marked appeal in Turkey where as many as 1,000 Turks have joined up;

Dear friends, In the background to this conflict and the foreign military intervention, there has been a mass exodus of Christians from Iraq, mainly to the neighbouring countries of Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. Since 2003 the population has dropped by up to half and is now thought to be around 400,000.

In recent years there has been growing pressure to 'Islamise' the country and its legal system – a trend crystallised in the 2005 constitution – putting small religious communities at risk. There have been several attacks on Christian leaders and communities in the last decade by Islamists. Since 2002 at least 73 churches have been attacked and hundreds of Christians killed, before the recent massacres of IS are even taken into account. The existing strife in Iraq is now compounded by the violence of IS, which has forced thousands to flee their homes: 500,000 in the north of Iraq. A further 700,000 in the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region, where the authorities need encouragement and support to provide the refugees with help. 600,000 were displaced in the time between June and August this year alone! At the beginning of August 2014 IS captured Iraq's 'Christian capital' Qaraqosh, reportedly forcing up to a quarter (around 100,000) of Iraq's Christian community to flee, as militants gave them three choices if they stayed: convert, pay a tax or die.

Dear friends, The Yazidi population of Iraq has suffered similarly to the Christians. There are about 600,000 Yazidis but since last August 130,000 Yazidi residents of Sinjar have flooded into Iraqi Kurdistan and many were slaughtered by IS. Let us

now have a look at the most tragic case of all, Syria. This is the country in the region to experience the worst effects of the IS advance; the country has around 18 million people, with Muslims comprising 87% of the population. In comparison to Iraq, the Christian community is quite significant in size, making up the majority of the remaining population. Syria is now host to the world's largest humanitarian and security disaster. The statistics are shocking. Since the start of the unrest in 2011, 2.5 million people have fled the country, 6.4 million remain displaced inside Syria, and 10.8 million in total need assistance. UNICEF reports that, as of March 2014, 3 million children are now displaced, and at least 8,000 are leaving the country as orphans.

Dear friends, Let us now have a look at the situation in Egypt. Egypt remains out of the reach of the terror of IS. The Christian population makes up 10% of the country. There is further 'Islamisation' of Egyptian society expressing itself violently against the Christians after the removal of Mubarak from power in 2011. There was a significant rise in violent attacks and persecution against Coptic communities, and under the now ousted President Morsi, churches were attacked, priests killed, and Copts taken to court over blasphemy. 100,000 Christians were driven out of Egypt in 2012. In July 2013 Morsi was overthrown by the army, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, and attacks on Christian communities rose sharply in the disorder. Christians were kidnapped and killed, along with the destruction of churches. In 2013 thousands of homes and businesses, as well as 47 churches were attacked. In the spring of 2014 al-Sisi was elected as the new president of Egypt, but has already displayed authoritarian tendencies and Christians are slightly more, but not sufficiently, protected under his Regime also.

Dear friends, Not much is said about the situation of Christians in Israel and Palestine. However, the persecution of Christian communities remains a serious concern there also. For instance, a Palestinian monastery was firebombed in August 2013, and there were several accounts of vandalism on churches and cemeteries in both 2012 and 2013.

Ladies and gentlemen, Dear friends, And now you will ask me: what is the international community doing? My answer is that it was slow to react to IS advances, and there was a reluctance to intervene in a region which has caused such recent controversy. In July 2014, the UN Security Council passed a Resolution which condemned the violence and encouraged Member States to support the humanitarian missions in the region. By August the UN Security Council had passed another resolution admitting that parts of Iraq and Syria were now under the control of IS. In mid-August the involvement from the US had escalated and its European allies had joined the efforts. It was around this time that countries such as the UK, France and Germany started to supply the Kurdish forces after the Kurds requested international assistance. However, the beheadings of US journalists James Foley on 20th August and Steven Sotloff on 3rd September 2014 caused international outrage, and turned the tide of US public opinion towards a greater role in the conflict. The US intensified its air strikes and increased its involvement, from just protecting vulnerable communities such as the Kurds and Yazidis, to defending Iraqi infrastructure and supporting Iraqi and Kurdish defence forces.

Dear friends, In view of the tragic situation I presented to the Council of Europe

I have made the following Recommendations:

- \* All states in the Middle East and wider international community must condemn together the violent actions and ethnic cleansing by IS.
- \* The international community should help ensure that those responsible for gross human rights violations are brought to justice, without impunity.
- \* Council of Europe Member States, observer states, and others must recognise that current humanitarian missions are woefully insufficient. Therefore together they should increase humanitarian aid supplies to existing camps across Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, and expand aid programmes further.
- \* Member States of the Council of Europe should identify, hunt down and dismantle recruitment channels, which send young Europeans to fight for IS in Iraq and Syria, and prosecute those responsible.
- \* The government of Iraq must be supported in its attempts to provide a credible alternative for Muslims away from the draws of IS. In a break from recent years, universal inclusivity must be promoted at all levels.
- \* The international community should strongly encourage the region's media sources to engage in and uphold standards of 'good practice', and therefore refrain from inciting religious or ethnic hatred.
- \* Christian communities and other religious and ethnic communities in both Iraq and Syria should be encouraged to actively participate in ongoing discussions on the future of their countries.
- \* Member states of the Council of Europe should use their bilateral ties with states affected by IS to encourage them to maintain the development of human rights and civil liberties.
- \* The international community should encourage the upholding of fair and equitable status for all religious and ethnic groups in before the law, with no religious law beyond appeal to civil courts.
- \* Countries in the region must be encouraged to recognise that democracy alone is not enough; "respect for human rights should be enshrined in either a constitution or bill of rights".

Dear students, These were my recommendations to the Council of Europe, in my dual capacity of Rapporteur on the situation of Christians, and Head of the Political Committee. I believe Greece in either the EU or the Council of Europe has done her duty. It is time for the international Community to stop this tragedy.

Thank you for your attention.