The Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy is an inter-parliamentary institution based in Athens, set up upon the initiative of the Hellenic Parliament. The I.A.O held its first meeting in Halkidiki, in June 1993. The I.A.O consists of Orthodox MPs from Europe, the US, Asia, Africa and Australia. The I.A.O’s aim is to develop the Orthodox cultural heritage, enhance communication between its members in order to promote the role of Orthodoxy in dealing with current social problems on the basis of the principles of democracy and Christian values and contribute to the global dialogue for human rights and peaceful relations between nations.

Acknowledgments:
Thanks to the President of the Hellenic Parliament Mr. Konstantinos Tasoulas for the printing of the volume by the Hellenic Parliament.
COEXISTENCE OF CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

MINUTES OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
“Unity in Diversity and Fundamental Freedoms for Christians and Muslims in the Middle East: A Conference for Parliamentary Dialogue”, Beirut, 3 – 4 April 2018

The Volume was pre-pressed, manufactured and designed in 4 languages (Greek, Russian, English and Arabic) by PEDIO Publications S.A.
10 Syntagmatarxou Davaki & Mylopotamou, Athens 115 26
Tel.: 210 3390204 • Fax: 210 3390209 • e-mail: info@pediobooks.gr • www.pediobooks.gr
Cover edited by PEDIO Publications S.A.

Printed and bound in all languages by the Directorate of Publications and Printouts of the Hellenic Parliament

Coordinator General of the Volume Dr. Konstantinos Mygdalis
Translations by: Samuel Bissaras, Olga Patrounova, Roni Bou Saba, Georgia Tsiliki, Chrysostomos Tromboukis

2021 Publication
COEXISTENCE OF CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

MINUTES OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
“Unity in Diversity and Fundamental Freedoms for Christians and Muslims in the Middle East: A Conference for Parliamentary Dialogue”

Beirut, 3 – 4 April 2018
In rememberance of
of the victims
of religious intolerance.
Participants to the Conference ........................................................................................................10
Prologue ..........................................................................................................................................15

Welcoming address by Mr. Ghassan Moukheiber, Member of the National Assembly of Lebanon, Rapporteur of the I.A.O. Committee on Regulation .................................................20

Message by the Speaker of the National Assembly of Lebanon, Mr. Nabih Berri:  
   Farid Makari, Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly of Lebanon ...........................................22

SPEECHES
   Dr. Andreas Michailidis, Secretary General of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (I.A.O.), Member of the Hellenic Parliament .................................................................28
   Sergei Gavrilov, Member of the Russian State Duma, Member of the I.A.O. International Secretariat, Representative of the Speaker of the Russian State Duma .................................................................32
   His Beatitude Patriarch John X Yazji, Patriarch of Antioch and the entire East of the Greek Orthodox Church ..................................................................................................................34
   Ioannis Amanatidis, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Greece ................................................37
   Ali Asghar Mohammadi Sijani, Alternate Secretary General of the Parliamentary Union of the Organisation of the Islamic Cooperation Member States (P.U.I.C.) .................................................................39
   Pedro Roque, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM) .....................42
   His Eminence Mufti Sheikh Salim Soussan, Representative of His Eminence, the Grand Mufti of the Republic of Lebanon and Sunni Spiritual Leader .........................................................48
   His Eminence Bishop Samir Mazloum, Representative of His Beatitude the Maronite Catholic Patriarch of Antioch and all East ...............................................................................................52
   His Eminence Mufti Ahmad Kabalan, Representative of the Head of the Higher Islamic Shiite Council ........................................................................................................................................55
   His Eminence Archbishop Cyril Salim Bustros, Representative of His Beatitude the Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch of Antioch & all the East ........................................................................59
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Sheikh Sami Abou El Mona, Representative of the Head of the Druze Spiritual Council .................................................................61

Nikolaos Filis, Member of the Hellenic Parliament, Representative of the Speaker of the Hellenic Parliament ........................................64

Angelos Votsis, Member of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Cyprus Member of the I.A.O. International Secretariat, Representative of the President of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Cyprus ...........................................................................67

Omer Abdelrahim El-sheikh Badr, Member of the National Assembly of Sudan, Representative of the Speaker of the National Assembly .................................................................69

Victor Phesheya Hlatshwayo, Member of the Parliament of Swaziland, Representative of the President of the Pan-African Parliament 75

Asaf Hajiyev, Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (PABSEC) ...............................78

Ambassador Anda Filip, Director for member Parliaments and External Relations of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), Representative of the IPU Secretary General .................................................................80

Carla Khijoyan, Representative of the Secretary General of the World Council of Churches (WCC) .................................................................85

Haxhi Dede Edmond Brahimaj, World Leader of the Bektashi Community ..........................................................................................88

Konstantin Zatulin, Member of the Russian State Duma, Chairman of the I.A.O. Committee on International Policy ..............................................91

Anastasios Nerantzis, Former Secretary General of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (I.A.O.), Representative of the official opposition in Greece ...........................................................................................................95

George Varnava, Former Member of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Cyprus,-Member of the Cypriot Parliamentary delegation to the I.A.O. ..............................................................................................................99

Prof. Valery Alekseev, Advisor to the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (I.A.O.) .................................................................104

Zakaria Kutsnashvili, Member of the Parliament of Georgia, Member of the I.A.O. International Secretariat .................................................................112

Dr. Maximos Charakopoulos, Member of the Hellenic Parliament, Rapporteur of the I.A.O Committee on Human Rights ..........................116

Ivan Sukharev, Member of the Russian State Duma, Head of the I.A.O. Coordinating Cooperation Committee with the Interparliamentary Assembly of the Eurasian Economic Community .........................................................119

Dmitry Vyatkin, Member of the Russian State Duma, Chairperson of the I.A.O. Financial Committee .........................................................123

Robert Halef, Member of the Parliament of Sweden, Member of the I.A.O. Committee on Social Activity, Family and Motherhood ..................126
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position, Organization</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aleksander Čotrić</td>
<td>Member of the National Assembly of Serbia, Rapporteur of the I.A.O. Committee on Culture</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genc Pollo</td>
<td>Member of the Parliament of Albania, Member of the I.A.O. Committee on Culture</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muamer Zukorlić</td>
<td>Member of the National Assembly of Serbia, Chairperson of the Parliamentary Committee on Education, Science, Technological Development and the Information Society</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theodoros Stathis</td>
<td>President of the Foundation for Mediterranean Studies, Greece</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Thomas Goumenos</td>
<td>Political Science, Panteion University of Athens</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Konstantinos Mygdalis</td>
<td>Advisor to the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (I.A.O.)</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artashes Geghamyan</td>
<td>Member of the Parliament of Armenia, Chairperson of the I.A.O. Committee on Culture</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ioannis Voulgarakis</td>
<td>Political Science Graduate of the University of Crete</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maher Kawourma</td>
<td>Member of the Parliament of Syria</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hatem Bashat</td>
<td>Member of the House of Representatives of Egypt</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theodore Ssekikubo</td>
<td>Member of the Parliament of Uganda, Rapporteur of the I.A.O. Coordinating Cooperation Committee with the Pan-African Parliament</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tarek Khoury</td>
<td>Member of the House of Representatives of Jordan, Member of the Parliamentary delegation to the I.A.O.</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prof. Ljubisa Stojmirovic</td>
<td>Member of the National Assembly of Serbia, Head of the Serbian Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Parliamentary Dimension of the Central European Initiative</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christos Stylianides</td>
<td>European Commissioner on Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimitrios Avramopoulos</td>
<td>European Commissioner on Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship (Videotaped message)</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdelmonem Al Odat</td>
<td>Member of the House of Representatives of Jordan</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdullah Zureigat</td>
<td>House of Representatives, Jordan, Member of the I.A.O. Committee on Education</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omar Rahal</td>
<td>President of the Human Rights and Democracy, Media Centers, Palestine</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tereza Yassa</td>
<td>Member of the National Assembly of Sudan, Member of the I.A.O.</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DECLARATION</td>
<td></td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibition of Mount Athos engravings: “Virgin Mariam. Icons from Her Holy Garden. Mount Athos”</td>
<td>203</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS:

Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) (Ambassador Anda Filip, Director for member Parliaments and External Relations of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), Representative of the IPU Secretary General Martin Chungong)

Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union (Fayez Al Chawabki, Secretary General of the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union)

European Commission (Christos Stylianides, European Commissioner on Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management)


Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (PABSEC) (Asaf Hajiyev, Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (PABSEC))

Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM) (Pedro Roque, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM))

Pan-African Parliament (Victor Phesheya Hlatshwayo, Member of the Parliament of Swaziland, Representative of the President of the Pan-African Parliament Mr. Roger Nkodo Dang)

World Council of Churches (WCC) (Carla Khijoyan, Representative of Rev. Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit, Secretary General of the World Council of Churches (WCC))

Movement for Politics & Policy for Unity (MppU) (Letizia de Torre, President of the Movement for Politics & Policy for Unity (MppU))

REPRESENTATIVES OF CHURCHES:

His Beatitude Patriarch John X Yazji, Patriarch of Antioch and the entire East of the Greek Orthodox accompanied by His Eminence Metropolitan Elias Audi of Beirut

His Eminence Mufti Sheikh Salim Soussan, Representative of His Eminence, Sheikh Abdul Latif Derian, Grand Mufti of the Republic of Lebanon and Sunni Spiritual Leader

His Eminence Bishop Samir Mazloum, Representative of His Beatitude Cardinal Bechara Boutros Al-Rahi, Maronite Catholic Patriarch of Antioch and All East

His Beatitude Archbishop Shahé Panosian Representative of the Patriarch of the Armenian Orthodox Church H.B. Archbishop Aram I Keshishian

His Eminence Metropolitan Clemis Daniel Kourieh of Beirut, Representative of His Holiness Ignatius Aphrem II, Patriarch of Antioch and All East of the Syriac Orthodox Church
Sheikh Sami Abou El Mona, Representative of H.E. Sheikh Naim Hassan Head of the Druze Spiritual Council
Bishop Jihad Mtanos Battah, Representative of His Beatitude Patriarch Ignace Joseph III (Ephrem) Younan
His Eminence Mufti Ahmad Kabalan, Representative of H.E. Sheikh Abdel-Amir Qabalan, Head of the Higher Islamic Shiite Council
His Eminence Archbishop Cyril Salim Bustros, Representative of His Beatitude Joseph Absi, Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch of Antioch & all the East, accompanied by His Eminence Bishop Issam Darwish
His Eminence Bishop Georges Asadorian, Representative of His Beatitude Krikor Bedros XX Gabroyan Patriarch of the Armenian Catholic Church
His Eminence Bishop Raphael Traboulsi, Representative of the Chaldean Catholic Church
His Eminence Bishop Yatron Koliana, Head of the Assyrian community in Beirut Mufti of Tripoli and the North Sheikh Malek al-Shaar
Fr. Rouais al-Ourashalimi, Representative of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Lebanon
Fr. Antonio Ibrahim, Representative of the Coptic Catholic Church in Lebanon
Cleric Sayyid Ali Fadlallah, Shiite Theologist
Haxhi Dede Edmond Brahimaj, World Leader of the Bektashi Community
Parliamentarians, religious and academic personalities participated in the Conference, in front of the facade of the Lebanese National Assembly.
PROLOGUE

“O God of Peace, Father of Mercies,
Thou hast sent Thine angel of great counsel to grant us peace.
We are guided towards the light of the knowledge of God
and, keeping watch by night, we glorify Thee, O Lover of humankind! “

(Katavasiae of the Nativity)

PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE AND FREEDOM of religion for all is a core principle that the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (I.A.O.) consistently couples with coordinated actions and activities by Orthodox parliamentarians to protect the rights of Christians the world over.

The I.A.O. is, therefore, pleased to present you with the minutes of “Unity in Diversity and Fundamental Freedoms for Christians and Muslims in the Middle East: A Conference for Parliamentary Dialogue” held in Beirut, Lebanon, on 3-4 April 2018, a gathering co-organised by the I.A.O. and the Lebanese Parliament in collaboration with the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union, which brought together the representatives of 9 Organisations, 17 Churches and 17 I.A.O. member-Parliaments.

The Conference was under the auspices of H.E. the President of the Republic of Lebanon, Mr. Michel Aoun, and took place within the wider context of March 25 celebrations, the Feast of the Annunciation having been proclaimed National Day of Interreligious Dialogue back in February 2010 by virtue of a Lebanese government decision.

In addition to the Conference, the exhibition “Virgin Mariam. Icons
from Her Holy Garden. Mount Athos” was held at the hospitable and iconic Beit Beirut exhibition area in cooperation with ‘Mount Athos Photoarchive’ and with the Governor of the Lebanese state capital, Mr. Ziad Chebib, formally inaugurating it.

The Conference, as such, culminated in the adoption of a Declaration that is also included in this edition and via which all participants -states-people, religious leaders, parliamentarians, university professors, scholars and researchers- insisted on the need to protect the religious identity of every single person living in the tormented Middle East, no exception whatsoever, since, unfortunately, a series of conflicts and wars, inner fragmentation, poverty, refugeeship and discriminations have created a smothering environment for the peoples of many countries in the region.

By means of this Conference, the I.A.O. once again articulated its grave concern about the present and the future of local Christian populations. Fanaticism and religious intolerance by certain extremist organisations in conjunction with the indifference of much of the international community and the prevalence of narrow-minded geopolitical and economic pursuits that contrast with morality and the law, have made, in recent years, Christian populations suffer genocide. It was only the reining-back of Daesh and its offshoots in Syria and Iraq that prevented the absolute elimination of the Christian element from its ancestral home.

Nevertheless, three years down the line and in view of this publication, the I.A.O. bears witness to the dire circumstances of Christians in the Middle East. In the meantime, only a handful of Christian refugees have actually made it back home as the appropriate conditions for normal life to resume have yet to be created while relevant programs and economic support projects by international organisations and financially-robust nations have failed to materialise. And, on top of that, in the part of Syrian territory which is still under Turkish occupation, the persecutions of religious minorities, including Christians, continue unabated.

For all these reasons and to help raise the awareness of the world community, to mobilise it to come to the rescue of the currently few remaining Christian populations, their number having significantly dwindled over time, in the Middle East, the I.A.O. is unremittingly watchful and outspoken about the predicament of the Christians, who are being uprooted from their ancient homelands, denouncing such developments to inter-
national organisations, governments and parliaments alike. At the same time, the I.A.O. also fosters synergies to track down and record persecutions as well as to showcase and promote the presence of and actions undertaken by Christian populations in general.

The Conference in Beirut proved there is huge scope for cooperation between Christian and Muslims and that it is possible to beat stereotypes but also to create a common front against religious intolerance and against converting religion into a toolkit serving political purposes, which certain forces have indeed lately been invested in so as to promote revisionism at the expense of international peace and the rule of law.

We, at the I.A.O., are committed to continuing our work to promote dialogue, mutual understanding, law and peaceful coexistence.

Athens, Spring 2021

The Secretary General
Dr. Maximos Charakopoulos

The President
of the General Assembly
Mr. Sergei Gavrilov
Prominent representatives of 17 religions, confessions and denominations at the Inaugural Ceremony of the Conference
Your Excellency, Mr. Speaker of the National Assembly,
Your Eminences and Graces,
Reverent Bishops,
dear colleagues,
ladies and gentlemen.

“UNITY IN DIVERSITY and Fundamental Freedoms for Christians and Muslims in the Middle East”, the International Conference for Parliamentary Dialogue the National Assembly of Lebanon and the I.A.O are co-hosting, brings together 75 parliamentarians from 16 different countries, from Europe, the Arab World, Asia and Africa, along with parliamentary associations and unions, as well as various regional and international organisations that take part in this kind of dialogue.

As its title clearly indicates, this Conference is based on four pillars.

First: It emphasises political, and not exclusively religious, dialogue through the involvement of parliamentarians, the representatives of democratic states and citizens.

Second: It emphasises two virtues, unity and diversity, which may be combined without clashing.

Third: It emphasises the human factor, the Christian and the Muslim populations of the Middle East, for experience has painfully shown that
when terror leads to murder, destruction and displacements, in the name of any religion whatsoever, there are victims in all religious communities and denominations, though Christians feel they are being targeted the most.

Fourth: It emphasises rights and freedoms as points of reference that all citizens, regardless of religion or origin, be they in the minority or the majority, must theoretically have and enjoy. Supreme is the granting of freedoms and equal rights as well as responsibilities, and especially freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, freedom to manifest religion in teaching, worship and observance and the right to political participation.

The Conference comes at a critical and perilous point in time as the Middle East is currently going through unprecedented warfare and conflicts, much of which clearly involve war crimes and crimes against humanity. Moreover, the Arab-Israeli conflict is still going strong, the core issue being the future of Jerusalem, the Holy City, the capital of the three monotheistic religions. Despite that, this region is also witnessing illuminated ventures which promote coexistence and dialogue, in particular the Lebanese decision to declare the Day of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary a national holiday on the 25th of last month, a fact which led the I.A.O. to have the Conference in Lebanon in partnership with the National Assembly.

At the start of our proceedings, let us listen to an address by the Speaker of the National Assembly of Lebanon, H.E. Mr. Nabih Berri, which Mr. Farid Makari will be delivering on his behalf.
HONOURABLE PRESIDENTS of the Lebanese communities, dear colleagues, Speakers and Presidents of delegations from Lebanon and the world, dear guests to the Conference and to the National Assembly of Lebanon.

On behalf of H.E. the Speaker of the National Assembly, Mr. Nabih Berri, may I express my gratification at the opening of this Conference, as well as the pleasure of the National Assembly of Lebanon and the members of the Lebanese parliamentary delegation to the I.A.O., for choosing Beirut, the capital city of Lebanon, and the National Assembly to have this meeting on *Unity in Diversity and Fundamental Freedoms for Christians and Muslims in the Middle East.*

Our gathering in Beirut comes at a critical point in time for the Middle East, politically speaking, following President Trump’s illegal, dangerous and provocative decision to declare Jerusalem Israel’s capital and to move his Embassy there. Our meeting stresses the need to help disseminate a culture of peace based on justice, the right to live, peoples’ rights, human rights and freedoms, such as the right to self-determination, political independence, safety, shelter, work, medical care, education and all the fundamental rights, while condemning injustice and practices, such as occupation, imprisonment and group punishment, that lead to displacements and people losing their homes and property.
Our meeting today also underscores the undying wish to have peace in Lebanon, to promote coexistence, dialogue and concord, to turn this country into a paradigm for ecumenicity against all attempts at generalising the clash of civilisations, against all communal, denominational and racial conflicts, as well as to help avert the scheme to end history. Let it be noted that the East, and Lebanon, first and foremost, has been, since the dawn of history, a pioneer in notions such as state function, political systems, trade and economic transactions. In addition, our meeting today expresses support to Lebanon to fully implement U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701, to mark its maritime boundary, ensure its right to its off-shore resources and support its army as well as its parliamentary system.

The duties of our Orthodox Parliament encompass peace and international security. Let us, therefore, starting from this very meeting, embark on our common endeavour to assume multilateral international responsibility for a fair and sustainable peace in the Middle East and let us pursue the fulfillment of the national expectations of the Palestinian people so that they may return to their land, have self-determination and establish a Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as its capital.

In this framework, let us point to the need to find political solutions to issues and problems in the region, with Syria at the top of the list, based on the equal participation of all communities and states. Let it be underlined that the political discourse of our Organisation focuses on the fact that change cannot be achieved by force and violence; it is only possible through avoiding violence and by including all political paragons in determining the itinerary of states and their respective societies, in creating a common life, with Lebanon as a role-model.

Honourable Mr. President, dear participants,
day in, day out, there is proof of the fact that this parliamentary institution is what the world needs:

First, to organise the global Orthodox presence, making Orthodoxy a common point of reference vis a vis international issues by adopting a common stance on combating terror, poverty, racism and occupation.

Second, to manage cross-state and intercontinental problems resulting from unruly ICT use and the consequences thereof.

Third, to jointly manage the negative impact of economic globalisation
through a shared religious and cultural identity, using the common ground of our parliamentary conference and all that it stands for.

Our meeting in Beirut is an opportunity to draft a timely Declaration in line with the events we are up against. We wish, moreover, for stronger cooperation with the Arab Parliamentary Union following our encounter in Kiev, in 2004 that confirmed the need for new ways to work with PUIC.

This meeting is an opportunity to remember that the Christians of the Orient, as real Arabs, should have a say in the hot topic of Palestine, and that they are the descendants of the Ghassanids and the Lakhmids, the foundation of the first Church in the East and its connection to the Arab language. Let us remember the fathers and the founders of the Church, the martyrs among them, as well as those martyrs who fought against colonial and economic invasion by the side of the locals. They are Saladin’s soldiers and Issa al-Awwam’s companions.

This meeting brings to mind all the resolutions on the Orthodox Arab issue, drafted at the Orthodox Arab conferences of the second millennium, all the way through the resolutions of the Thessaloniki Conference in 2016. This meeting of ours also reminds us of more resolutions on the triangle of poverty, terror and an end to Israeli occupation, the need to recognise the State of Palestine with Jerusalem as its capital, and the need for legitimate decisions and international law to be implemented.

This Conference looks forward to a joint international Orthodox parliamentary stance which:

First, rejects and denounces acts that are an insult to the Christian Holy Land by the occupation forces, the most recent being the one against the Church of the Holy Sepulchre right after the Al-Aqsa Mosque had been targeted. Any decision insulting the history and geography of the Holy City ought to be condemned and Jerusalem must be thought of as the capital of the State of Palestine.

Second, invites the countries of the world, especially European Parliament members and the Russian Federation, to recognise the State of Palestine.

In addition, in the presence of the Lebanese National Assembly, I call upon you to underline the significance of interfaith dialogue on a national and international level.

I call upon us to enhance interparliamentary dialogue, by means of active
parliamentary diplomacy, to resolve conflicts between religions and to enhance religious initiatives aiming at a better understanding.

Let me welcome you yet again in the hope that this Conference will help accomplish everything we are all looking forward to, primarily to grant the wish of all peoples in the region and the world for a lifetime of peace and security.
Parliamentary delegations and Parliamentarians from 17 I.A.O. member-states participated in the Conference
Honourable participants,

THE I.A.O IS EXCEPTIONALLY PLEASED, from a political point of view, and honored to be graced with your presence. After several years and considerable efforts, circumstances are mature at last and, thanks to the will of the Lebanese Parliament, and all of the political leaders of Lebanon, we are here to pledge our commitment to the principles of independent parliamentarianism and the scope it allows for political entente and cross-cultural understanding in the world today. Moreover, all of us are here to stress the significance of this festive period for Christianity and to underscore our will to serve the cause of promoting common understanding and peace between people and groups with varying cultural and educational backgrounds, different religions, diverse beliefs and points of reference.

This country and its people are an example of mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence that refutes all attempts by Cassandras’, figuratively speaking, to suggest we are yet again being faced with the need for new borders and states that are homogeneous, ethnically and religiously. After all, to quote Michel Chiha, one of the co-authors of the 1926 Lebanese Constitution,

“...Lebanon is, at its true core, a beautiful and noble effort for peace-
ful coexistence among the different religions, traditions and races. It is a natural effort proposed by History as a testimony...”.

Unique questions flash through the mind of every reasonable person looking at the history of this region, and looking at the past as testimony. Centuries of historical coexistence including crises past and bloody wars with a huge death toll did not upset the itinerary of the peoples. Religion provided them with the wealth of diversity inside the same social or ethnic group on a daily basis. Besides, mutual respect for the people and the symbols of other religions was inherent in local traditions. A figure, cherished and venerated by all, is the Blessed Virgin Mary as you will find out for yourselves, soon, at the Beit Beirut Museum and Urban Cultural Centre, and its display of copper etchings from the male-only Mount Athos monasteries. Let us not forget religious wealth is so big that the term “religions minorities” also refers to religious expression within the same religion. As for alleged historical pseudo-dilemmas about who is more Arab and who is less of an Arab, they never were meaningful to the people.

His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I was to the point and, as he so eloquently put it, “unfortunately, religion, throughout the 20th century, became an instrument of power and managed to even alter the nature of the religious vocation which was meant to be a paragon of coexistence, friendship and dialogue.”

Indeed, right here, next to us, in our backyard, in the Mediterranean, the wider region of the Middle East is being stripped of the historical and beneficial presence of the Christians, thus getting poorer by the day.

Whilst we, politicians and parliamentarians, seem helpless and unable to react in the face of such problems, and with terrorism having become a daily issue for many areas all over the world, it would be useful to look at our own share of responsibilities in our capacity of statespeople who endorse a value system which, for its most part, is based on the principles and values of democracy and isopolity.

Our very own, the great Macedonian Greek philosopher Aristotle discussed the excellence of the citizen in democracy. But how does this upright citizen end up being a refugee, weak and helpless, slaughtered by jihadists, a victim in the hands of colonialist groups or settlers, bombed and banished and exiled because of his ethnic origin and identity?

We all know that Parliament makes laws and obviously checks up on
the work of Government while the latter has the power to make political decisions. But the impasses in which the citizens have been stuck take them back to the source of democracy and the original expression of the people which is parliamentarianism. Let me explain how impasses create new networks for parliamentary expression,: inter-parliamentary unions with local and/or cultural and geopolitical features.

This is another one of our joint efforts to exhaust even the slightest margins of political dignity through inter-parliamentary channels. Let us try to make them substantial, to enhance and to strengthen their work. Let us project and promote them as bridges for communication and true understanding of the real issues that plague the average citizen of the world.

Dear friends,

this event of ours coincides with the 25th anniversary of our organisation. The I.A.O. was established in 1993, at a time when real socialism was falling apart, and has corroborated its statutory intentions and the goals of its founders over its 25-year itinerary. A lot has changed in the world in the meantime, a few things might have improved, more has become worse, and we as an organisation have been contributing to strengthening parliamentary discourse throughout. We helped highlight and unveil a new parliamentary reality as well as cooperation, which is indeed so necessary these days. We assisted, after all, in the groundbreaking effort the IPU General Assembly made in St. Petersburg in 2017 with the adoption of the Declaration promoting cultural pluralism and peace through interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogue.

It is with satisfaction that I am stating that all of us, coming from different longitudes and latitudes, representing different cultural traditions and political parties have, for the past 5-years, produced excellent political texts and resolutions trying based on our shared values which are, after all, universal, to take stock of the problems and risks the world is faced with while, at the same time, highlighting the reasons and the causes behind them without misgivings or any dependency whatsoever, therefore proving that the whole venture is indeed independent.

It is exactly on the basis of these principles that we drafted the declaration you have in your hands, counting on resolutions and decisions
by international organisations and inter-parliamentary institutions while relying, fundamentally, on our shared understanding of what is right and just for the people, which no one could possibly overlook and ignore.

Reaffirming his words, let me quote Kahlil Gibran, the Lebanese poet and writer: “I love you, my brother, whoever you are - whether you worship in a church, kneel in a temple or pray in your mosque”.

May we be successful in our proceedings.
Honourable participants,

THE LEVANT IS OF MAJOR importance to the dialogue between Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land. Regardless of our personal political views and preferences, let us act on Saint Paul the Apostle’s advice with “...the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left...” (2 Corinthians 6:7).

Hence the message of the Speaker of the State Duma of the Russian Federation:

“Let us greet all participants in this Conference, aimed at a stronger mutual understanding between and among the people while facilitating inter-faith and cross-cultural dialogue. A comprehensive discussion of the issues the faithful followers of religions are dealing with today can help come up with ways to prevent future clashes, conflict and other public safety threats.

Russia and Lebanon are uniquely experienced in interacting and communicating with Muslim and Christian communities.

The world is facing serious challenges putting the spiritual foundations of our social lives to the test. To begin with, international terrorism is one of the most serious threats to peace and security.

It is obvious that only dialogue and joint efforts, based on a shared understanding of common ethical and legal values, can help avert the demise of our world and our civilisation.
We look forward to an in-depth debate and to advancing common solutions in defense of humanitarian values, peace and safety. We wish you, dear participants in this Conference, a productive and positive outcome”.

May this Conference convene more frequently and be permanent.

We are thankful to our gracious hosts, the National Assembly and the Republic of Lebanon, for their warm hospitality and we are grateful to you all for taking part in this Conference. Thank you very much!
Your Excellency,
Mr. President,
Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,

WE MEET TODAY under the dome of this Parliament in Beirut, the city of laws and legislations. We meet and the momentum of history imparts a sense of great responsibility. Today, Orthodox Christian and Muslim parliamentarians are here to affirm that parliamentary life is in the service of people, and in the service of peace and its cause. We are gathered in this place, which futile wars destroyed and the Lebanese people’s love for life rebuilt. It was rebuilt to affirm that the voice of reason and conscience is the harbor of salvation and that the logic of dialogue and the quality of frankness are the way for the advancement of nations.

Your august assembly in this place is of great symbolic value. You have convened to look closely at the concerns of this East and certain turning points in its history casting a shadow over its people from all walks of life. It is the misfortune of the age of globalisation to see the borders of societies, national entities and states often immune to
culture and civilisation but almost always open to destructive and extremist ideologies. Unfortunately, what we are witnessing in the East, the beacon of civilisations, is the importation of extremist ideologies, terrorism, violence, kidnapping and other scourges. We thank God that Lebanon has been partially protected from these dangers, but we are here, speaking from this podium, to preserve Lebanon as a country of citizenship and coexistence. We appeal through you to all governments for the maintenance of stability of this country. Lebanon has the full right to exploit its oil and all its natural resources. All Lebanese have the right to elect their parliamentarian representatives. This is an important matter that places a historic responsibility on everyone’s shoulders, testing the extent of their love for and devotion to Lebanon. Hence, our hope and call for elections to take place on time.

I convey through you the pain of the Church of Antioch as a result of what has happened in Syria, which continues to suffer from terrorism, murder, displacement, takfirism and the destruction of institutions. I convey to you the pain of the Middle Eastern people, in general, and the Christians in particular. Their sufferings come as a result of targeting entire countries and societies, the international community turning a blind eye to incitement, false slogans and propaganda aimed at the destruction of our country. Killings, international interference, takfirism, emigration and the spread of slogans referring to minorities and majorities are not, nor will they ever, be part of our vocabulary. We, Christians from the heart of this East, have been and will ever be present.

We are part of this great East and we will not be terrorised by either murder, kidnapping or terrorism. I can only point from here to the bleeding wound of the Christian East, which is best represented by the abduction of our two brothers, the Archbishops of Aleppo, Youhanna Ibrahim and Boulos Yazigi. This is the sixth year since their abduction, and we regret the continuous disregard of the international community.

Not that far away from Beirut, Al-Quds Al-Sharif occupies our heart and being. It remains in our eyes, Muslim and Christian, a pil-
grimage site for the mercies of God and a rock standing firm against the transferring of embassies and empty rhetoric.

In the Holy Paschal season, we greet all of you in the peace of the Gospel, from the Church of Antioch, where the disciples of Jesus were called Christians first. May God’s Mercy be upon all of you and the peoples you represent, and the work of your conference be successful and fruitful.
Ladies and Gentlemen,

IT IS WITH GREAT PLEASURE I address this International Conference held here, in Beirut, in partnership with the Parliament of the friendly country of Lebanon, the I.A.O and PUIC, for I firmly believe that dialogue is critical in our era, especially on this particular subject: “Unity in Diversity and Fundamental Freedoms for Christians and Muslims in the Middle East.”

Starting out from the premise that human beings, regardless of race or religious identity, are at the heart of our joint effort, we are all called upon to come up with concrete ideas and proposals on policies and actions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

public dialogue represents an effective means in the context of this effort.

Dialogue is the only tool we have to mitigate differences, to tackle misconceptions and misunderstandings and to nip difficulties in the bud before they become convoluted.

In this context, Greece, on the initiative of Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias, organised two international Conferences in Athens, in 2015 and 2017, on interfaith and intercultural dialogue for peaceful coexistence in the Middle East, and has already established an Observatory to that end.

The Athens Conferences, which provided an opportunity for an exchange of views between government bodies, religious leaders and civil society, resulted in concrete proposals, thereby contributing to the formu-
ulation of a policy for the international community and religious institutions that requires prompt and fruitful consultation between and among stakeholders and interested parties so as to have a chance to be successful.

The international community needs to pay special attention to and put in place a seamless and integrated program for combating religious extremism while encouraging wealthy nations to urgently increase support, humanitarian aid and the protection of refugees and persecuted religious minorities living on these lands, regardless of religion or beliefs, age, gender or ethnic identity. It, moreover, must focus emphatically on women and children, people with disabilities, the elderly and people who have lost their families.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our own “identity” has been forged through Orthodoxy which, apart from being a faith, is also the end-result of a long cultural journey that evolved over two millennia, since the dawn of Christianity, and was moulded by means of classical axiology.

Therefore, every encounter bringing together similarity and otherness is a source of joy as it interprets our reason for being. It is with such joy that I come to meet you and greet today’s event.
In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.
Your Excellency, Mr. Speaker,
Deputy Speaker,
representing the Speaker of the Lebanese National Assembly,
Your Excellency, Mr. Secretary General of the I.A.O., distinguished Presidents and delegation members,
distinguished Deputies of the Lebanese Parliament,
ladies and gentlemen,
May Peace, Mercy and the Blessings of God be upon you.

LET ME BEGIN WITH OUR THANKS and gratitude for the kind invite to PUIC to participate in this Conference. Let me, also, extend my thanks to our brothers, the Republic of Lebanon and its National Assembly for organising such an excellent event and for their generous hospitality.

Your Excellency Mr. Speaker,
the conference touches on a subject of major importance, “Unity in Diversity and Fundamental Freedoms for Christians and Muslims in the Middle East”, an issue our Union is also concerned with.
In the course of a rapprochement and constructive cooperation between the followers of different religions and cultures, we ought to shun intolerance and extremism and, given this context, our Union, in its announcements and resolutions, has repeatedly insisted on:

• The need to combat intolerance and religious fanaticism.
• The need to safeguard religious sites and to prevent attacks against them.
• The need to enforce laws to confront incitement to hatred and violence, sectarianism, extremist indoctrination and hate speech.
• An appeal to member governments to have a resolution adopted by the world community, especially the United Nations, to promote absolute respect for all divinely-inspired religions, to prevent freedom of expression from offending people’s religious sentiments and to limit phenomena of religious hatred between and among the peoples.
• The need for national legislation to penalise insults to prophets, religions, holy sites and places of worship.
• The need to uphold the International Declaration of Human Rights that bans religious intolerance and paves the way to minimising tensions between cultures and religions.

We welcome all forms of partnership aimed to combat extremism and intolerance, to secure appropriate conditions for peaceful coexistence and to foster fraternal cooperation between the followers of god-inspired religions, especially in the Middle East.

At this point, it is necessary to stress that Zionist arrogance relies on the practice of defying and rejecting all international, human and moral values and maps. The overall activity of Israel, the occupation, its hostility to Muslims and Christians alike, its hostility to mankind, in general, are a threat to the security of the entire region. It is necessary to stress the imperative need there is for unity and solidarity between the peoples in this region to combat the Zionist danger and to, simultaneously, tackle all risks which are a threat to the safety of our communities, to eventually avoid the spread of anarchy in the region, to not jeopardise global security and to have peace and safety in the world.

Mr. Speaker, ladies and gentlemen,
allow me to confirm, once again, our staunch will to work with you in a constructive manner on all of the aforementioned.

I pray and wish that God Almighty makes your Conference a success. May Peace, Mercy and the Blessings of God be upon you.
IT IS A GREAT PLEASURE and honour for me to be here with you today. I would like to express my special thanks to our hosts for the kind invitation and generous hospitality in the beautiful Beirut. I take this opportunity to personally thank H.E. President Nabih Berri for his continuous support to the activities of PAM, in particular for our missions to Syria to support national reconciliation and to facilitate humanitarian aid.

Today’s meeting comes at a very delicate moment for the region. Many of our countries suffer from internal conflicts, terrorism, mass migrations, unemployment and climate change. Moreover, hate speech, populism and xenophobic rhetoric against religious minorities are escalating. Extremists do abuse daily the universal values of religion to justify and provoke violence.

The impact of the frequent terrorist attacks and acts of violent extremism against specific communities such as the Sunnis, Shiites, Yazidis, Christians, Jews and Muslim Rohingyas, as well as other minorities - per-
ceived or portrayed as different given their ethnic or religious background - must be considered, in many cases, as acts of ethnic cleansing.

Moreover, the evolution of modern societies, multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual, due to globalization and population movements, brought with it fear. Fear that national and religious identities are being diluted by growing diversity.

The hateful ideology, which extremist groups are advocating for, runs contrary to what the global community considers as the foundation of our peaceful coexistence: that we are at our best when our communities are inclusive, diverse, peaceful, and respectful of differences.

Their criminal acts and perverse interpretation of the sacred texts go against the United Nations Charter’s principles and the values enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The diversity of the Mediterranean has always been deeply rooted in the traditions of coexistence and tolerance. Throughout the nearly fifteen centuries of Muslim-Christian encounters, individual adherents of both traditions have lived peaceably with each other most of the time. Long periods in world history reflected harmonious interactions. Medieval Andalusia, for example, provided a venue for Muslims and Christians, along with Jews, to live in proximity and even mutual appreciation. It was a time of great opulence and achievement.

Repercussions from the Crusades continue to resound in the contemporary rhetoric employed by radicals of both faiths. In recent years relations between Muslims and the rest of the world have become increasingly polarized, fanned by anti-Islamic rhetoric, under the propaganda of the terrorists of ISIS and the language used by Media.

Yet religion, whether Islam, Christianity or Judaism, teaches openness to the other, assistance to the needy and the embrace of our common humanity. At the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean, we firmly believe that religion is part of the solution, not the source of the problem.

This notion applies in many ways to the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, one of the longest-standing conflicts. The international community has failed to resolve it one decade after the other, which is often misappropriated and exploited by extremist groups from all sides.
PAM, as an inclusive parliamentary forum for dialogue, has always been committed to decrease tensions, correct misperceptions, and promote a culture of tolerance across the Mediterranean region. For example, Palestine and Israel are both members of the Bureau as Vice-Presidents. In that context, we can appreciate concrete dialogues among those committed to peace and the Two-State solution, in line with the Arab proposal.

Our Assembly has also been attaching great importance to interreligious and intercultural dialogue since its establishment, by dedicating its 3rd Standing Committee exclusively to dialogue among civilizations, inter-faith cooperation, and human rights. In the framework of its activities, our Assembly has recently organized two parliamentary Conferences on this subject.

The first meeting, held in Rome in December 2016, hosted by the Italian Senate, brought together representatives of national and international parliaments and organizations, as well as religious leaders and representatives of academic institutes and civil society.

During the meeting, we expressed our concern about the unprecedented humanitarian situation and condemned human rights violations and acts of terrorism and violent extremism perpetrated against religious and cultural communities in the context of the protracted conflicts in the area, especially in the Middle East.

We also recognized that religious-inspired political violence is often characterized by doctrinally weak religion, as such a pattern has been observed in the personal and religious background of the terrorists who committed attacks in Europe.

Moreover, we emphasized a conception of secularism that incorporates values of different faiths by recognizing the cultural and educational values. We called for the re-designation of the public space in order to reflect the current religious plurality, considering it an irreversible phenomenon of contemporary societies.

Finally, we identified, as common values, the fundamental rights of democracy, the rule of law and the recognition of human dignity as the basis for a peaceful and coexistence of people of different cultures and religions on both shores of the Mediterranean.

Among the concrete proposals resulted from the conference, I would mention the development of international programs and projects aimed
at increasing respect for freedom of religion and expression; the revision of school textbooks so that they provide cross-cultural information and counter the threat of conflict and the risk of a “clash of civilizations”; and the support of projects jointly conducted by several communities, including humanist and non-religious associations that seek to consolidate social bonds.

Based on this first meeting’s recommendations and conclusions, the PAM Secretariat, together with the Parliament of Morocco, organized in February 2017, a visit to the Kingdom for the PAM delegations and members of the 5 + 5 West Mediterranean Forum.

The visit aimed to review the Moroccan security approach, the reform of religious affairs and the educational institutions; role in fighting against terrorism and radicalization, promoting the values of tolerance, solidarity, understanding and moderation. The visit also focused on the fight against terrorism and violent extremist through the role of the State and the school for imams.

These two events laid the basis for the report and resolution on “Freedom of expression and freedom of religion: the religious pluralism in the Mediterranean region”, unanimously adopted by the Assembly during its 11th Plenary Session held in Porto, Portugal.

In particular, with this resolution, the Assembly reaffirmed that freedom of religion, conscience and belief is an essential part of the human rights system, and called its Members Parliaments to comply with their commitments and obligations to guarantee the full enjoyment of this fundamental right to all individuals, including persons belonging to religious minorities, in accordance with appropriate national legislation and in conformity with international human rights law.

We parliamentarians, have a duty to assume our responsibilities on behalf of our fellow citizens who have made us their representatives. This includes adopting laws to combat intolerance, extremism and discrimination in all its forms, and to develop and guarantee the legal system that is essentially the protection of the rights of religious and ethnic minorities in practice; to create mechanisms to ensure political participation, representation in parliament, state institutions, government for leaders, and minority representatives in a manner that ensures the ability to defend their interests fully.
A true intercultural dialogue for peace and security can only take place if human rights and fundamental freedoms are protected and promoted.

We must affirm without ambiguity that there can be no religious or cultural justification for violence. Although those who perpetrate terrorist acts often manipulate religion to pursue agendas that have nothing to do with religious teachings, religion is not a root cause of violent extremism.

Indeed, religions generally condemn violence and promote peace. It is therefore incorrect and misleading to blame any particular religion for acts of violence carried out in its name.

Our responsibility is to protect what binds us together and present a united front against forces that would like to reverse these positive trends by exploiting what still divides us.

Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

As you might know, PAM is a Permanent Observer at the UN General Assembly. We are operational partners of the Security Council and members of the UN Alliance of Civilizations. We operate to promote the application of the relevant Resolutions, of which we are proud contributors starting from the drafting process.

We should never allow any self-righteous ideologies that violently exclude others due to religious, sectarian, or ethnic differences. Safeguarding the remnants of diversity and tolerance in the Middle East is essential for the restoration of regional safety and security.

It may contribute to the prevention of the spillover effect that threatens the neighbouring regions and far beyond. The terrorist acts in Europe are illustrative in this regard. The phenomenon of the terrorist foreign fighters returning from the battlefields of Iraq and Syria threatens not just, but also the security of the countries of their origin. However, it is becoming a growing destabilizing factor in other regions, stimulating fear and mistrust.

Religious leaders of all religions must play an active role in stopping the increasing polarization in our societies. They play a key role in building trust and mutual understanding among the people of our countries, by promoting peaceful co-existence and tolerance as well as providing a counter-narrative to violent extremism.

Finally, we have to keep in mind that to overcome religious differences
does not mean that we have to homogenize our societies. Our commitment to interfaith dialogue aims at respecting and not surpassing the difference, because the goal of the dialogue is to help us live with our inmost religious differences without neglecting or surpassing the difference.

More acceptance and tolerance are needed, not less. A dialogue is needed between believers and non-believers, but above all amongst believers of different faiths, to allow for a cultural encounter. Our national and regional parliaments should become models of such messages. I look toward establishing a structured dialogue with the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, taking in consideration that we share many members. Thank you for your attention.
In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.
All praise be to God; Salaam and peace upon all the Prophets and Messengers.

His Eminence the Grand Mufti of the Republic of Lebanon Sheikh Abdul Latif Derian has honoured me to convey his greetings and wishes for a successful conference and to deliver his speech on his behalf.

Your Excellency Mr. Speaker, ladies and gentlemen,

May Peace, Mercy and the Blessings of God be upon you.

ISLAM IS A RELIGION that preaches doing good, not evil. It calls for charity and virtuous behaviour for the common good, as all people are the children of God the Maker and he is partial to all who are useful and benevolent. The Almighty instructs us all to be good: “Tell My servants to say what is best. Satan sows discord among them. Satan is to man an open enemy” (The Night Journey, 17:53). The Almighty warns people to mind Satan, who is lurking and intent on sowing dissent, discord and bloody conflict.

A kind word gets concord and love, and love inside the hearts and souls grows stronger. Islam has nurtured its children, thanks to a clear culture based on tolerance and not fanaticism, to know and to not reject
one another, to choose love over rancor, dialogue over conflict, affection over violence, compassion over cruelty, peace over war, justice and moderation over extremism or introversion and secrecy, to shun communitarian and doctrinal discord.

The entire Muslim culture was built on several doctrinal and spiritual foundations, including the following:

• Diversity is a universal premise. A Muslim believes in the uniqueness of God the Maker the same way he believes in the diversity of His creations, in many fields, since there is the diversity of origin: “Oh mankind! We created you all from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another” (The Chambers, 49:13).

• There is also multilingualism “And of his signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your languages and your colours” (The Romans, 30:22) as well as religious diversity “Had your Lord so willed, He would have certainly made humanity one single community of believers” (Hud, 11:118).

• There is doctrinal and spiritual diversity within the same religion since God gave us teachings affording a variety of views and hermeneutics.

• There is, moreover, political and partisan diversity. Since we allow and accept the premise of diversity on a spiritual and doctrinal level, we must, therefore, allow for a range of parties in politics. Since parties are none other than a range of doctrines in the political field, doctrines are a range of laws and rules for versatility on the spiritual and the religious field.

The history of Islam confirms that the Muslims never had feelings of hatred for anyone. Islam is the religion of spirit and instinct. It would not have anyone convert by force because “there is no compulsion in religion” (The Cow, 2:256). Islam builds a connection between Muslim offspring and citizens, on the one hand, and non-Muslim, on the other, based on the powerful foundations of tolerance and justice. The foundation for this connection is the word of the Almighty: “As for those who have not fought against you for your religion, nor expelled you from your homes, God does not prohibit you from dealing with them kindly and equitably. God loves the equitable” (The woman tested 60:8).
An affable attitude, justice and freedom are what every Muslim is expected to have towards everyone, including people who practice different religions, and to refrain from persecution and belligerent practices. Islam does not merely guarantee religious freedom for other people, whom it neither abandons nor marginalises, but it promotes coexistence in a participatory environment within an ambiance of concord and compassion, tolerance and human dignity.

Following this brief overview, let it be said that if, at any time, there were digressions or isolated incidents of abuse of power in history, they were due to factors having nothing to do with neither the essence of Islam, nor the value and the truth of its teachings. Some Muslim leaders through time might have made mistakes that were harmful to Muslims and non-Muslims in the process. They can be no point of reference for either Islam or the Muslim populations. Spiritual leaders always intervene to make amends for the digression and restore the order of things. Have there been any isolated digressions by Muslims, on an individual basis, they were reactions that backfired.

Your Excellency, Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen.
Lastly, I would like to dwell on the fact that we are living in a world filled with conflict and clashes where the logic of the powerful reigning over the weak prevails. The future course of countries is in the hands of great powers, hegemonies that rule and give priority to their own ambitions and interests at the expense of smaller and weaker countries. Years and years have gone by in the Middle East with war and conflicts like the ones the Balkans, at the heart of Europe, Bosnia, Kosovo, Croatia and Serbia, went through.

International interference and interventions have made the situation of our people worse and the pains of our citizens bigger, whenever they sided with this or that party instead of managing the root cause of crises, in particular with regard to Palestine and everything that is going on there. Justice, freedom and law are fundamental in all solutions and arrangements.

We live in a multicultural, multi-religious and multi-denominational region where there is diversity of origin, language, dialects and customs. Our fate is coexistence under the umbrella of unity and our common val-
ues. This is the logic of the History and the Geography of the region, and it has been like that for millennia.

To live together there must be mutual understanding, respect for our specificities and teamwork with a view to building a bright future of prosperity for a developed, harmonious and cooperative society. Herein lies the responsibility of statespeople, of religious officials, be they Muslim or Christian, spiritual people, social, humanitarian and educational institutions and organisations, sports associations etc. They are all responsible for creating a place where there shall be no offence, no disregard, no power play, no reference to minorities. It should be a place for honest citizens, building and protecting their homelands under the auspices of a powerful and fair state relying on the authority of law and order, not on personal, partisan or other self-serving pursuits which are incompatible with religion, race and culture.

Thank you.
May Peace, Mercy and the blessings of God be upon you.
Your Excellency Mr. President,
Your Eminences and Graces,
Most Reverend Bishops,
dear representatives of Orthodox Parliamentarians,
dear brothers and sisters.

I AM HONOURED to have been entrusted with representing Cardinal Bechara Boutros Al-Rahi, Maronite Patriarch of Antioch and all of East, at this international parliamentary conference. In conveying his gratitude for the invitation, his fatherly blessings and sincere wishes for a successful gathering, let us commend you all for your efforts to bring people closer together, to facilitate interfaith and intercultural dialogue and to promote human rights.

One of the most important and sacred rights is what you are referring to in the title of your conference under “fundamental freedoms”. The first among these freedoms is religious freedom, to which the Vatican Council dedicated an entire document. According to the view of the Church, religious freedom is far bigger than freedom of religion and conscience which, in turn, are inscribed in the legal constitutions of human legislation that bind them to the notions of tolerance, social peace, state neutrality and others. Yet, freedom of religion and freedom
of conscience ignore a capital dimension of religion since religion does not confine itself to individual beliefs or ceremonies and rituals. It is an integrated way of life that manifests itself in both the individual and the collective structure of our social presence. As a result, religion plays a role in the set-up and the evolution of society, meaning we cannot view the citizen as a dual construction consisting separately, on the one hand, of a set of religious beliefs and citizenship, on the other.

Religious freedom interprets human independence through the intent of a person to find truth, about themselves and the universe. Pope Benedict XVI says it is not permissible to ban religious groups from performing freely those acts that reflect their religious convictions as to society and human activity overall. One of the objectives and the fruits of religious freedom is that it provides people with incentives and helps them work with a higher sense of purpose and responsibility to fulfill obligations inside the confines of social life.

The Pope also mentions that religious freedom means people can express their specificity and define their individual lives, even their social lives, based on the will of God. Therefore, limiting this freedom, or refusing it, paints an incomplete image of the person. Excluding the public role of religion leads to a society of injustice because such exclusion is not in harmony with the true nature of the human being. As a result, a violation of religious freedom constitutes a violation of all rights and fundamental freedoms. Religious freedom is the summary and the apex of all rights and freedoms and a component not to be neglected in a state of law for it conveys the highest notion of human dignity. The Pope adds that, with due respect to the globalisation of government institutions, we ought to always acknowledge the public dimension of religion.

In this context, it is essential to have a sincere dialogue between religious and secular institutions to help people develop and have a fair and harmonious society. This is where another question begs itself: How does the Church perceive the presence of the active individual, both as citizen and as religious adherent, at the core of the secular State? According to the response the Second Vatican Council gave, people turn
naturally towards the community and are inclined, by nature, to actively participate in and not just hover over the public sphere.

A Christian is no exception to this rule since, due to his human nature and faith, he takes part in building humankind and strives to have a place in the Kingdom of Heaven. And so a Christian is not torn between freedom of conscience and an active role in society.

As regards those who believe they can dedicate themselves fully to earthly things, which they think of as totally alien to their religious life that they limit exclusively to worship, observing rituals and some moral obligations, they are utopian in their belief. This telling-apart between faith and daily conduct is one of our times’ greatest dangers. There is no need to artificially separate professional and social activities from religious life. A Christian needs to experience faith, to deal with social issues, to work to disseminate concord, love and peace and to help achieve social justice and development.

Pope Francis wrote that “no one can make us confine religion within a secret esoteric world with people having no influence on social and national life and no interest whatsoever in the healthy institutions of the civil society. Who would shut themselves in an altar instead of passing on the message of St. Francis of Assisi or Sister Teresa of Calcutta? Real faith can never be treated as a kind of luxury or selfishness. Real faith always envelops a profound desire to change the world and share our values”.

In light of these illuminating teachings, the Church of Lebanon and the East thinks of its presence in this region, for over two millennia, as a testimonial and a mission. It is a presence of faith and prayer that incarnates reality in this part of the world, including the traditions of the Orient, its languages and cultures, Arab and non-Arab. It is an interactive presence serving people in the area and showing solidarity with regard to all the issues that concern them. It is an ecumenical presence, an open dialogue with all religions, cultures and nations.

Thank you for listening.
In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.
All praise be to God, the Lord of the two worlds; we beseech you to send tranquility and blessings upon our Prophet, his virtuous companions and all who follow him.

Your Excellency Mr. Speaker,
Your Eminences and Graces, Reverent Bishops, dear brothers and sisters, may Peace, Mercy and the blessings of God be upon you.

AS CONCERNS THE RELATIONSHIP between religion and man, Christianity is linked to the person of Christ while Muslims connect to the Prophet Muhammad, God bless him and grant him peace. The Will of God, who created truth, started with the human being, the absolute man, Moses the God-seer, Jesus the Messiah and, last, the Prophet Muhammad. The fundamental issue is, to begin with, human reconciliation so as not to carry conflict over to the heart of our religions. So, how can a person be a human first and then a pious follower? Faith is expressed by the person, so should it insult the person, it insults God himself. According to the Prophet “all creations are the children of God and whoever betrayed them, betrays God”.

On a parliamentary level, a Member of Parliament represents the country, the people and the citizens, regardless of religious, ethnic, cul-
tural or secular identity. Should a parliamentarian beg to differ, then he is detached from the essence of representation and becomes an enemy of self, the people, the homeland and the objective of expressing and communicating issues that concern citizens as human beings. We, therefore, think of religion as a primary foundation for inner growth.

This foundation and identity must be protected and guaranteed as a spiritual freedom based on the principle that “there is no compulsion in religion” (The Cow, 2:256). We, moreover, equally believe in religious and spiritual diversity based on “You have your religion and I have mine” (The Unbelievers, 109:6). In addition to that, in “Oh mankind! We created you all from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another” (The Chambers, 49:13) reference is made to “know”, and there is no mention of “fight”, in line with a general legal rule that ensures harmonious diversity for people and their versatile features.

Imam Ali referred to “people being equal”, as a legal basis, regardless of religion, origin, language, nation etc. This secures the character of the state while preserving the religious and spiritual identity of individuals and social groups within a framework of rules, guaranteeing the participation of identities in the context of a state, which in turn, guarantees the rights of people and religions.

In other words, dear brothers, based on the thoughts of God Almighty, war, discrimination, marginalisation and hostile deeds should not be power tools in the hands of Nations since God’s Voice calls for unity, isonomy and justice. Power and authority signify justice to serve the interests of the people. God’s word stipulates that “we have honoured the children of Adam” (The Night Journey, 17:70). Adam’s children equal every person regardless of origin or political identity.

Consequently, origin, despite its significance, cannot be above the person itself. As concerns infidels, the term’s practical interpretation signifies person to person opposition: opposing the right to think, to live and to participate, opposing the right to belong, the right to religion and culture, opposing and objecting to rights and social justice.

We, therefore, oppose and object to extremism and discrimination because they reflect a savage way of thinking that is far from God’s immeasurable kindness. And that presupposes, at the level of rights, the
existence of national and legal guarantees to support the human being as a human, the citizen as such, freedom as a spiritual, religious and cultural choice made by individuals, and groups of people, without impinging on the general legal guarantee of the notion of the individual person or the citizen. Exactly like people must be dealt with as God’s creations, power, the state, the parliament and the government must be treated like a social construct aimed to serve people and not the other way around.

That, my dear brothers, requires that everything be put to the service of the person, including power, public infrastructure, resources, capabilities, networks, as, in principle, citizens must be seen as reasonable individuals with religious, spiritual and cultural specificities of their own, starting with the fundamental premise that “you come of Adam and Adam was formed from the dust of the ground”, in the wider framework of a state that guarantees diversity like God guaranteed it when He made a versatile range of human creatures of different colours, intellects, gender, origin and varying vocations.

Last, dear brothers, we like not to use the term “minorities” since “all men are equal” signifies that fellow human beings are equal. Nonetheless, this term has been forced upon us due to spiritual and political failures. And hence, we fight against prejudice and discrimination of all sorts, have laws protecting particularities and specificity within a state establishing spiritual and religious dialogue, as well as national, international and universal partnerships to guarantee the principle of “man being a brother to man” while refraining from injustice, betrayal or attacks.

We believe in the principle “one person is to another what the head is to the body”. He who puts diversity at the center, and sees order as guarantee, ensures the safety and security of both state and people and then parliamentary representation brings God and man closer.

Unfortunately this is our ailment in Lebanon where sectarianism is a deadly disease causing utter disregard for the human being’s worth and a lethal poison annihilating the identity and function of the state. The same root cause may be found in regional and national “fires” that some international and regional entities manipulate and rekindle to cause damage, pain and death, in the name of political, cultural and spiritual
discrimination resulting in regional and international segregation, thus turning countries, such as Palestine, incl. Holy Jerusalem, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and others, into war zones because some tend to “devour people and countries” in a world of atrocity and power play.

Brothers, may God give success to your Conference for the sake of individuals, homelands and peoples.

Thank you.
Your Excellency, Mr. Speaker, 
Your Eminences and Graces, 
Most Reverent Bishop, 
dear friends.

HIS BEATITUDE JOSEPH ABSI, Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, Alexandria and Jerusalem, greets and wishes the Conference best of success in strengthening national unity, first and foremost in Lebanon, and across the Middle East and the world.

The national unity of Lebanon is based on two foundations. We are eighteen religious communities, in total, that believe there is one and only God, one and only Lebanon. Our fundamental conviction, our faith in one God, may vary among the faithful followers since God is so big the human mind cannot accommodate or comprehend him. Therefore, we believe that all religions are making an effort to get closer to the one and only God. In making such an effort, religions come across difficulties and try to show their faith in manifold ways, unable as they are to comprehend the mystery of God.

In our ecclesiastical traditions there is an expression about God “that filleth all in all”. Our God can accommodate us all though it is impossible for our mind to accommodate him. We accept one another, humble and
so diverse in our ways to express the one and only God. No one is allowed to categorise others as infidels. Who authorised you to act as the only representative of God Almighty? We are all mere people with a finite spirit and finite scope for expressing ourselves.

Heidegger, the great philosopher, once said “we are en route to language” (nous sommes en voie vers le langage) and added that we are all en route to the right expression for God Almighty. Regardless of whether we are scholars, philosophers or theologians, respect for otherness and all that may be different, accepting each other in our diversity, is one of the foundations.

The other foundation lies in the fact that all of us have one single homeland. It is the outcome of the advent and the presence of peoples, religions, communities and tribes. It was our destiny to find refuge in the land of the Phoenicians, the Philistines, the Canaanites, who all came to this place and were destined to live together. That very destiny is a matter of freedom.

We choose this country to be home for all who respect one another and live with love and mutual respect. And, thus, we find ourselves in Lebanon, after so many trials and tribulations, religious and sectarian wars, and say we are past the era of madness and the folly of war. Reasonable people are back and have affirmed the need to have one Lebanon. They came back to their senses and say there cannot be one single Lebanese population group monopolising Lebanon. No single group may prevail and rule over Lebanon or even rule alone.

We are all flowers of diversity in God’s garden. There is one God and there shall be one and only Lebanon with “Allahu Akbar” sounding from the minarets and bells tolling to break the news that “Christ is risen. Truly he’s risen”.

Thank you for listening to me.
Your Excellency Mr. President,
Your Eminences and Graces,
Honourable guests,

THIS MEETING OF PARLIAMENTARIANS representing Orthodox peoples and the World of Islam at a conference on diversity and fundamental freedoms, with participants coming from various countries, denominations and cultures, practically confirms the notion of unity in diversity. Unity is the foundation stone for our homelands, it reflects the one and only truth around which religions and humankind revolve.

The spiritual role of religion is to be the link that keeps a versatile and diverse society together. It is the starting point for every social, cultural, human and, possibly, political role. No doubt the protection of society is achieved through upkeeping the spiritual, human and social values of religion and, therefore, we need to shield our homelands from the risk of turning religion, religious freedom, diversity and multiculturalism into arenas of competition and contempt for one another. Instead, let us turn religion and religious diversity into an oasis projecting the unity of humankind and the fundamental values of people, as free and rational beings, having in mind that all people are brothers and created equal.

What God Almighty gave people is a blessing. People could turn this
blessing into a curse. Even the role of the spirit, the greatest blessing the Maker gave man, may be alienated through the interference of the ego, passions and evil deeds which can make the spirit fatal for man. Moreover, diversity is a blessing from God Almighty that should not permeate the cohesive national fabric to become negative and antagonistic when what we are looking for is unity in diversity. Maybe, like Plato, the Greek philosopher, said, the first and best victory is to conquer self.

The fate of the Lebanese and the people of the Orient, Muslims and Christians alike, is coexistence (symbiosis). Their fate is to manage their diversity. The East would no longer be the East were Christians and Muslims to live isolated from one another, as Mr. Mohammed Sammak, the Secretary General of the Committee for Islamic-Christian Dialogue, said and his partners in national dialogue organisations agreed. Symbiosis is the culmination of this exceptional diversity, it is a need imposed by the unity of language and culture, and the unity of human dignity as mentioned in the national memo of the Maronite Patriarch.

The advantage of diversity in Lebanon is the foundation for establishing the state, a collective state entity of the citizens or, as they call it, a secular state that respects freedoms and religions and benefits from the wealth of religions, in the absence of conflict or clashes between religion and politics but with full respect for one another and them both complementing each other.

The state is responsible for guaranteeing freedoms, managing diversity, keeping public order and achieving prosperity for the people. The state must get its spirituality from religious spirituality and values. Religion as an institution is responsible for strengthening the faith within the hearts and the spirit of the people, disseminating the culture of mercy, love and respect for human dignity.

Diversity should not be an obstacle in building a state, it should rather be its foundation. National unity is based on the utmost understanding of human obligations and national commitments. The Lebanese experience is in excellent example and explains why His All Holiness the Pope said “Lebanon is more than one country; it is a message”. Michel Siha also talked about it. Kamal Jumblatt, the progressively-thinking Lebanese leader of the monotheistic Druze community, has also been clear about it. “Lebanon is the country with the greatest multiculturalism that could
have been bigger. The set-up of Lebanon could have been exemplary had we agreed to complement one another in reality in the framework of one nation and the same cultural heritage, had we endorsed unity in diversity and not in plethora”.

It is clear to us that the mission of every community is to protect all others and not confine itself to self-protection. This way, diversity is not counter to unity but compliments it. We need to figure out a way to manage diversity, to view Lebanon as a role model and to consolidate the notion of sharing since it expresses respect for history and sacrifices. We, moreover, need to make sure the rights of the founding communities are being protected.

I wish your annual conference success hoping you, together with us, will contribute to making Lebanon an international center for dialogue between religions.

By way of conclusion, let me recite some poetic verses while kindly asking for the interpreter’s understanding.

“We, no matter how much we may differ in diversity, see it as richness; we, no matter how much we may be different, we are brothers; we walk with insight and perspicacity, including unity in our efforts. We do so for love, not for the dust of war; this is our Revolution. We express our thoughts and draw not the knife. Our destination is about what is right, our objective is the person. The call for charity is one voice, it is a cry inside. Should we be accused of infidelity, our response would be mercy to injustice, no hostilities. And if our houses are destroyed, we will rebuild them by doing good, protecting with piety the mosques that protect us. The power of our faith is our weapon, which we profer to whoever, arms in hand, wishes to annihilate us. Mercy starts with the Prophet, who forgets not the vulnerable, and with Jesus on the Cross of our own suffering. We feed love with gratitude and she feeds us back.

Thank you.
Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen, let me greet you on behalf of the Speaker of the Hellenic Parliament.

INTERESTING STATEMENTS and speeches have been made by statespeople and religious officials. The title of this Conference is tragically pertinent these days. We see, intuitively, that we are heading towards an escalation of violence in the Middle East after the thoughtless and provocative decision of the President of the United State to recognise Jerusalem as the capital city of Israel.

A few days ago, we watched dozens of children and other civilians perish in what triggered another wave of violence in the region. And we see, on a daily basis, that the war in Syria actually means refugees, migrants, bloodshed, death and civilian casualties. The war escalated following a recent invasion of Syrian territory by Turkish troops. We realise it often unfolds before the very eyes of an unmoved world community, if it has not actually started due to incitement and intervention by big global powers.

A question still remains: how can religion, which in our days is quite frequently derailed and transformed into a mechanism for fundamentalism and intolerance and, what’s more, warfare and acts of terror the world over, recover its true meaning and value as the vehicle for love and peace? How can it, therefore, become a factor of stability, democracy and prosperity for all?
Obviously this is not wishful thinking, unlike what some might think. It is about the need to change international policies and politics that create inequality at an international level, perpetuate injustice and afford pretexts for a revival of anachronistic ideologies and often have religion chained to nationalism, or even religion serving state interests by means of violent actions and activities.

This is the 21st century and humankind is looking for some new meaning to the life of citizens the world over. It is obvious that the message of the churches, representing all religions, has to emanate from their statutory ideas about love, coexistence and peace. Yet, unfortunately, this is not the case and what I am alluding to is not only the extreme behaviors of fundamentalists but also certain perceptions that tend to turn churches from communities of love into authorities manipulating the power they have over the people.

On the flip side of such tendencies, both in the ecclesiastical as well as in our social sphere, general concern is growing and so is the need for religion to come up with answers to what the modern world is agonising over. There is the issue of peace and the big issue of discrimination coupled with a biblical imperative to treat people equally for we all are created “in the image of God”. Then, there is the so-called “social sin” since discrimination and inequality are on the rise across the world and there is also the “ecological sin” leading to environmental damage and the unraveling of the connection between people and nature.

Greece as an EU member undertakes initiatives in favour of coexistence, mutual understanding and crisis management. We are aware that scope for such initiatives also depends on the way in which the dominant political elites deal with, and quite often abuse, the European idea today. Europe, with its colonial background, could have gradually contributed to appeasement in the Middle East over the years after WWII. It has a role to play just as long as it stops acting myopically for itself and realises that the wider region is of concern. Because in the presence of restless neighbors, there can never be prosperity in Europe.

And let it be underscored there are many aspects to what we call “religious fundamentalism”. It is primarily an issue of nationalism and serving state interests. It is also related to undercutting the rights of women and children. Lately, an International Convention was adopted to help deal with
these problems, which we believe must be a core element within the scope of our activities and concerns. Without equality between men and women -equality in practice which often fails to be acknowledged in religious texts, too- there is going to be injustice and clashes within societies instead.

Let me once again commend and congratulate the organisers of this conference. The Hellenic Parliament supports, every chance it gets, initiatives for interparliamentary dialogue between Orthodoxy and Christianity, in a wider sense, with Islam and other religions. Let me, moreover, stress we undertake practical political initiatives as well. For example, as concerns the Palestinian issue, which is always cause for antagonism in this region, recently the Hellenic Parliament unanimously asked that the Palestinian State be recognised. I wish you good luck and all the best!
Your Excellency, Mr. Speaker
of the Lebanese National Assembly,
Honourable Mr. President
of the General Assembly and Secretary
General of the I.A.O.,
dear colleagues,
distinguished guests,
ladies and gentlemen.

AS OF DECEMBER 1948 the international community has ensured, through its Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that “everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes 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”. Furthermore, respect for the right to religious conviction is guaranteed in my homeland, as well as in other European countries, thanks to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which under Title II refers to, amongst others, protecting the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion as well as freedom of expression and information.

I.A.O., which Cyprus is a co-founding member of, is an organisation for parliamentary cooperation, its top priority is to defend human rights
and, as a result thereof, it defends and protects the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion in line with the Universal Declaration.

The subject of this international conference moves along those lines and here we are, in Beirut, which despite long years of conflict due to, primarily, intervention from abroad, is still an iconic city and a symbol of cultural and religious coexistence.

In Cyprus, where our people have been through trials and tribulations due to both foreign intervention and other interference, never has there been any problem whatsoever between, or because of, the two communities, the Greek Cypriot and the Turkish Cypriot, nor have there ever even been issues with regard to the other religious communities, the Maronites, the Armenians and the Roman Catholic.

Religious rights and the right to worship for all Greek Cypriots, from every religious community, have been blatantly violated in the occupied part of the Republic of Cyprus since the Turkish invasion of 1974 and through to date. Religious heritage and, overall, cultural heritage in that part of Cyprus has suffered huge damage and such heritage, mind you, does not just belong to the Cypriot people but the world.

Let me seize this opportunity to extend my thanks to the I.A.O. and its members for their unwavering support to the struggle of the Republic of Cyprus. Let me, furthermore, underline our readiness and willingness, and that of our House of Representatives, in particular, to act as a bridge for peace and stability in the Middle East in the context of I.A.O. work. That work is, moreover, clearly reflected in the subject at hand, which is cooperation and unity between Christians and Muslims through dialogue.

I wish best of success to the Conference. May constructive thinking and fruitful debates lead to adopting a declaration, the goals listed in which can become our tools in the pursuit of tangible results to benefit religious freedoms all over the world.
In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

“HELP ONE ANOTHER in acts of piety and righteousness and assist not in acts of sinfulness and transgression” (The Table, 5:2). Salaam and peace upon the Prophet, and all the prophets and messengers.

Thank you, dear brother, Mr. Speaker.

At the onset of my speech, let me congratulate you and all of our brothers who are taking part in this Conference. We, in Sudan, are truly focused on the ever-expanding role of a dialogue between Christians and Muslims and there is actually a Ministry in charge of such affairs.

The Speaker of the National Assembly of Sudan, the members of the Assembly as well as the government send their regards on the occasion of this meeting in the blessed and beautiful city of Beirut, which is a timeless example for others to follow, and, moreover, to the people of Lebanon, a country with splendour and history.

My dear brother, Mr. Speaker,
I’ll be making a short speech on “Religious freedom in Sudan”.
Religious freedom in Sudan

Introduction

Undoubtedly, reality as the Christian populations experience it in Sudan reflects the reality of all its citizens as to the freedoms divinely-inspired religions have set forth, for which there are constitutional guarantees.

These may be summarised in a few tangible points that Islam endorses, thus providing scope for coexistence based on the following:

- Common origins and human fraternity
- Human dignity
- Mutual Knowledge and Peace
- Good conduct
- Rights and obligations of non-Muslims and Muslims

Protection of religious freedoms by virtue of the Constitution and national legislation

The Constitution and the laws of Sudan fully protect religious freedoms, in line with international rules and principles where citizenship is the basis for rights and obligations.

Directorate of Church Affairs

The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments (Waqfs) is responsible for religious affairs touching on the State, places of worship, mosques and churches. An special Department, the Directorate of Church Affairs, is in charge of Christian affairs.

Christian communities currently present in Sudan

All Christian communities are present in Sudan. There is the Catholic, the Protestant, the Orthodox and, moreover, the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian Orthodox, the Eritrean Orthodox, the Armenian, the Greek-Orthodox and the Roman-Catholic Church.

Protestant Churches encompass all denominations associated with Lutheran theology, including the Evangelical, the Presbyterian, the
Sudanese Church of Christ, the Esoteric Church of Africa, the Church of the Brothers, the National Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Reformed Episcopalian. After the Renaissance there were more western denominations, such as the Pentecostal Groups, the Sabbath Church, the Evangelical Baptist Church, the New Apostolic Church, Jehova’s Witnesses and the Apostolic Bible Study Group.

The Sudanese Council of the Churches
The Sudanese Council of the Churches exercises its duties in absolute freedom. Members of the World Council of Churches (WCC), donors from abroad and representatives of ecclesiastical organisations pay regular visits. Last year, in 2017, there were elections and the Assembly was addressed to by WCC representatives in the presence of the Minister for Religious Affairs & Endowments, who took part in the inaugural meeting, made a speech and voiced the support of his Ministry. WCC delegates expressed their contentment as to the exemplary religious tolerance they found in Sudan.

In addition, various churches have been welcoming followers from abroad, with endorsements by the State. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Mr. Justin Welby, visited Sudan in the middle of 2017 to promote the Bishop of the local Evangelical Church to Archbishop and to inaugurate the 39th church. He, moreover, went to South Kordofan where he met with the congregation and inaugurated the Episcopal Church in Kadugli.

Furthermore, in 2018, Greek-Orthodox Patriarch Theodoros II paid a visit to Sudan. His overall impression was exceptional and he actually stated that, unlike what he had heard from the foreign media, there is religious freedom and tolerance in Sudan. Upon attending the first session of an international conference on religious freedoms, he referred to tolerance and religious freedom in Sudan, urging participants to go and see for themselves.

Many religious officials and Christian world leaders incl., among others, the Bishop of Prague, the head of the Sabbath Church and the American Delegation for religious freedoms, upon having visited Sudan, told the media about the current status of religious tolerance in our country.
Education:

The Church exercises its right to education. There are 6 Schools for Theology in Sudan, the graduates of which are religious officials, vicars and priests. There are also vocational and technical schools. Those of the Catholic Church, the Comboni Schools, are among the oldest in Sudan.

Conferences:

Sudan has organised various international conferences on the subject of religious freedoms and religious coexistence which were attended by many Muslim and Christian religious officials.

In addition, the Ministry of Religious Affairs & Endowments hosted a workshop on religious coexistence, which the leaders of all churches in Sudan participated in, the outcomes thereof being positive and the Ministry, subsequently, formally deciding to set up a committee to follow up on the results of the workshop. That workshop eventually led to a joint statement, by means of which Christian and Muslim churches rejected the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. We all know that the Holy City is the cradle of all religions and that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the second most important Muslim site, are located in Jerusalem.

Religious coexistence at the state level:

- It is customary for state representatives to go to our Christian brothers’ churches to wish them on formal celebrations and holidays, and the State sends delegations to take part in the festivities, on behalf of the Presidency of the Republic, in many provinces.
- It is customary for the Coptic community to host an annual feast during Ramadan for the Muslims, which the President of the Republic, Omar Hassan Ahmad Al Bashir, graces with his presence in the company of religious officers from various Muslim communities.
- The Sudanese society is experiencing an unprecedented framework
for tolerance with families exchanging visits for the holidays and on numerous social events.

- The State allows Christian public servants to attend religious ceremonies and Sunday Mass in accordance with the customs of each church and/or community.
- Furthermore, the State grants Christian public servants leave to celebrate Easter Sunday and Christmas.
- Places of worship are exempt from paying bills for power and water services.
- Christian education and courses are included in the curriculum for Christian students, which is decided upon by the Ministry of Education & Training.
- Christian populations enjoy freedom in legal matters pertaining to their private affairs, issues related to matrimony and inheritance, and there is also freedom to hold religious events.
- The Christians can rightfully have posts in all national institutions and State agencies, in the National Assembly, the Cabinet and other public sector entities, the armed forces, the police and state security services.

At this point, let me highlight, dear brothers, that a fellow participant, Joseph Makin Iskander, is among the very few to have been awarded the medal of the Sudanese Order of the Two Niles (A’ class), which is the highest distinction our State confers. He is a parliamentarian just like Sister Tereza, who is also attending the Conference. Brother Joseph has duly received the medal for his good conduct as a national, religious, commercial, economic, political figure and a precious link to distinguished connections. He has always been a role model and a giving person. He is very close to distinguished figures, a fact which the Sudanese people, regardless of religious community, have applauded, making him the subject of lauding press releases and articles in the media.

We, honourable siblings, are pleased to be part of the Conference. Rest assured we are absolutely consistent as a Parliament with the reports and the joint communique.

I hope God Almighty brings success to the Conference as a forth-
coming source of powerful reports and recommendations. On that note, I would advise all countries to be consistent with the recommendations of the Conference so that our Christian and Muslim brothers may be on the same page to serve mankind on a level playfield.

Last, I pray to God Almighty that we may be successful.

May Peace, Mercy and the blessings of God be upon you.
Your Excellencies,
Honourable Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen

ALL PROTOCOLS OBSERVED, it is indeed a great honour to, on behalf of H.E. Hon. Roger Nkodo Dang, the President of the Pan African Parliament (PAP) and on my own behalf, address the Honourable representatives and voices of the people of the Christian Orthodox and Muslim World. I am pleased to address this important occasion, which is a reminder of how far we as Parliamentarians have promoted the ideals of integration between the Muslims and Christian Orthodox, with a fundamental focus to promote peace and security in the World.

May I use this opportunity to inform Honourable Members that the President of the Pan-African Parliament, H.E Hon Roger Nkodo Dang has expressed his sincere utmost desire to personally honour this invitation. However, due to pressing earlier scheduled commitments, this desire could not be fulfilled.

Let me, at the very onset, commend the initiative and combined effort being made by the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, the Lebanese Parliament and the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union, in taking the step to initiate a constructive political but also interreligious dialogue which will contribute to the consolidation of the concept of international peace and security.
It is no news that Muslims and Christian Orthodoxy are suffering from a high level of discrimination, racism, intolerance, etc. It is on record where employers discriminate against Muslims because they believe that Muslims, on average, are less capable workers even if their paper qualifications are equal to non-Muslim applicants. Because it is based on beliefs, therefore it is rational discrimination, although illegitimate and illegal against the non-Muslims or vice-versa.

We, the Pan-African Parliament, in an effort to address the challenges that bring disintegration between religions, will continue to utilize various platforms to create awareness of religious challenges. We commit ourselves to promote peace and security in the Continent and beyond.

We recognize the need to create a dialogue Fora between the Parliamentory Institutions and Religious Communities on local and international level in order to enhance the effectiveness of democratic dialogue.

Through the international and local platforms, the PAP will raise the participants’ awareness on the need to protect freedom of existing religious beliefs, the right to religious education and the right to employment without prejudice of religion.

Honourable members,
May I, on behalf of the Pan-African Parliament, express our support for this commendable and tangible initiative to protect the vulnerable in our society. The time has gone when religious practice is subjected to past generations of discrimination, lack of freedom to practice, neglect and marginalization which inhibited religious contribution to society for the ultimate development of the World.

I commend you on the efforts and processes undertaken to ensure inclusiveness in religion and politics. We encourage other religious bodies to emulate this idea, develop and implement policies and laws to protect religion and its beliefs. Let us rededicate ourselves to a path of mutual understanding and respect with the hope that political and religious leaders will join us in the noble idea of peace among the different religions and beliefs.

Last but not least, may I also inform this august Conference, that, the PAP is in solidarity with the people of the Middle East, especially the people of Palestine, with the hope that peace will be obtained soon. It is
also worth reporting that during the PAP sitting in May 2017, the State of Palestine was granted observer status to the PAP.

Honourable members, the PAP wishes this august conference fruitful deliberations and the PAP commits to continue to strengthen its collaboration with the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy.

Your Excellencies, Hon. Colleagues, Distinguished, Ladies and Gentlemen, on this note, I on behalf of the President of the Pan African Parliament, thank you for your kind invitation.
Distinguished colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

IT IS A PRIVILEGE and honour for me to address you on behalf of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (PABSEC) and using this opportunity, I would like to express our deep gratitude to the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (I.A.O.) for the invitation to be here and take the floor in front of you.

The Black Sea Region was always attractive for the World, as a bridge between Europe and Asia and, at the same time as a crossroad of the main transportation arteries like the “Silk Road” from the East to the West and the “Viking Way” from the North to the South and at the same time this region is very rich in energy resources.

We are proud of living in this rich region, but our region’s most important value is the people. Different nations with different religions, different traditions and different cultures and we are proud of this. Therefore, our obligation to protect these people, who created a very beautiful atmosphere and a tolerant region with different religions and we have to protect these people.

Unfortunately, not only the Middle East or the Black Sea Region but the whole world faces serious threats, like terror, due to which, there is a huge number of refugees around the globe. Today the number of refugees is estimated at more than 65 million people and the damage to the
World Economy is estimated at more than $400 billion. This amount is increasing from year to year.

The Black Sea faces this serious threat as well. To illustrate that, on average, worldwide, one refugee corresponds to 100 people, while in the Black Sea region the ratio is one in 60. Our obligation is to find a solution to this problem. And in this regard, this Conference’s topic is very important, because -you know- all religions in the world and all peoples seek peace, stability, cooperation, security and we have to rely on these as facts.

It is difficult to address this problem by one country by one organization or one parliamentary assembly. We have to unite our efforts, because only together we can solve this problem will be able to win terrorism.

I guess the best answer to this situation, to fight terrorism was given more than two hundred years ago by the great German poet and philosopher Goethe, who said “the weak would like to be strong but the strong should be united to be invincible and so we have to be invincible”. Only together, we can organize our future and build our prosperity. We have to strictly enforce the principle of triple “P”: Prey to God for Peace and Prosperity.

I wish to all Nations and everybody peace, prosperity and collaboration.

Thank you for your attention.
Ladies and Gentlemen,

INTER-CULTURAL DIALOGUE is a theme that has accompanied the IPU over many decades, and also one that came up very prominently just a few weeks ago, in the context of the 137th IPU Assembly, held in Saint Petersburg.

Let me start by saying that since its inception in 1889, the IPU has been motivated by the firm belief in political dialogue and cooperation among MPs of different backgrounds and beliefs – ideological but also cultural – as a way to forge understanding and build a more peaceful world.

Over the decades, the membership of the IPU has grown and diversified, from a small group of like-minded MPs from Europe, Liberia and the US actively involved in the international peace movement, to an organization bringing together parliaments and parliamentarians from 178 States. All with different ethnic, religious and cultural perspectives and all of whom called upon to respond to the pressing issues facing their respective communities and the world at large.

Now, more than ever, we can say that the world is not just inter-connected, but it is inter-dependent. Global challenges such as terrorism and climate change know no boundaries, and the solutions to local is-
sues very often need to correspond to global solutions. As such, mutual respect, understanding and cooperation across cultural divides become imperative. This is true of course, not just at the international level but nationally as well, where, as we have heard, societies are more and more diverse and – evidently – this diversity is reflected in the composition of parliament itself.

In Saint Petersburg, for a week in mid-October, close to 2000 delegates from 178 countries, including over 800 MPs, 150 Speakers and Deputy Speakers of Parliament, deliberated on the theme of the general debate entitled *Promoting cultural pluralism and peace through interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogue*. Their deliberations were enriched by submissions from the United Nations and religious leaders, and concluded with the adoption of the Saint Petersburg Declaration.

Recognizing that interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogue is fundamental for peace and cultural pluralism, the delegates shared experiences and good practices and identified a series of practical avenues for parliamentary action.

As a very basic foundation, they recognized the importance of balancing respect for diversity with social inclusiveness and cohesion as a means of building trust within and among societies and as a sine qua non for progress, prosperity and high quality of life.

They underscored the fact that all individuals must be allowed the full enjoyment of their equal and inalienable rights recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights and humanitarian law treaties and standards, and that they should not be subject to discrimination on any grounds including culture, race, colour, language, ethnicity, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, or political affiliation.

As the past few decades have shown, cultural and religious diversity does not in and of itself guarantee peace and global acceptance of differences. National authorities and other key stakeholders must work together to build inclusive societies and combat the dissemination of divisive discourses, which can give rise to feelings of insecurity among certain groups and encourage the spread of nationalism, extremism and terrorism.

Main areas of action:
Strengthening normative processes and legal frameworks:
• ensure that national legislation is entirely fully in line with the core international human rights instruments;
• adopt legislative measures to protect and promote the identity of national, cultural, linguistic, religious, or ethnic groups and their rights to live in community with others;
• strengthen mediation processes at the national and global level as well as interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogue to address ethnic, cultural and religious conflicts and foster trust between members of a multicultural society.

Making parliaments more representative and effective institutions:
• introduce policies to ensure MPs are more representative of society in terms of gender, age, language, religion and ethnicity, including through the adoption of provisions to guarantee that national minorities hold at least one seat in parliament and can participate in legislative bodies;
• require governments to include an impact assessment on religious and ethnic minorities when submitting draft legislation and national budgets to parliament, in accordance with the objective of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to leave no one behind;
• create sufficient opportunities for parliamentary discussions and debates through, for example, the establishment of parliamentary committees or inter-parliamentary commissions on cultural pluralism and religious diversity in order to better understand and solve social conflicts through parliamentary action;

Preventing human rights violations relating to culture and religion:
• allocate sufficient resources to conduct awareness-raising activities on cultural and religious issues among law enforcement officers so as to strengthen their ability to identify and investigate hate crimes, in line with international standards and protocols;
• ensure that the legislative process is transparent, and that parliamentary records are made available and accessible so that religious and ethnic minorities can understand and follow the activity of MPs and hold them accountable for their actions;
• design protection measures for all religious and ethnic minorities within the national territory, including non-citizens, migrants and newly arrived minorities.

**Building social dialogue for multicultural and inclusive societies:**
• exercise effective budgetary oversight so as to prevent the funding of projects and organizations that promote hate and intolerance, openly combat hate speech in public discourse and online platforms;
• collaborate with scientists on cultural and religious matters and work in partnership with local religious leaders to assess social challenges, such as the struggle against fundamentalism, and ensure that religious and cultural interpretations respect the human rights of all people, in particular women, young people and ethnic and religious minorities;
• take concrete action to eliminate structural or systemic discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities, including by implementing processes for the collection and analysis of data disaggregated by gender, age, language, ethnicity, religion, and other minority status.

**Focusing on civic education and improving interpersonal skills:**
• promote the teaching of soft skills and human rights education at all levels of education, including the importance of religious pluralism and cultural diversity;
• establish a national network on diversity comprising academic and professional experts in order to share best practices and independently monitor the implementation of public policies;
• enhance the role of science, promote holistic approaches and comparative methods to better explain globalization processes and their impact, and support ongoing training on religious pluralism and cultural diversity for public officials, including local authority workers and police officers.

**Promoting international cooperation:**
• support international programs that encourage interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogue as well as projects to combat segregation and social fragmentation;
• foster parliamentary diplomacy to address interfaith and inter-ethnic conflicts;
• encourage interfaith initiatives aimed at building bridges and better understanding between communities.

These are commitments to which all our parliaments have signed on to. It is now up to us, working closely together in a spirit of openness and solidarity, to turn these words into action and deliver on our citizens’ expectations for a better and more peaceful world.

Thank you.
Your Excellency Mr. Speaker,
Your Excellencies,
Eminences,
Rev Fathers,
Dear brothers and sisters

IT IS A PLEASURE and an honor to be with you today and represent the World Council of Churches, a fellowship of 348 Orthodox and protestant churches from all over the world, committed to work together, walk together and pray together on this God-given journey of Justice and Peace.

It is equally a privilege to be standing at the heart of my birth-city, Beirut, a city where different religions, cultures and ethnicities embrace one another in every street and on every page of our common painful but glorious history.

We are gathered to express the deep conviction that our respective religions and beliefs share a common commitment to upholding the dignity and the equal worth of all human beings. Shared human values and equal dignity are, therefore, common roots of our cultures. Faith and rights should be mutually reinforcing spheres. Individual and communal expression of religions or beliefs thrives and flourish in environments where human rights, based on the equal worth of all individuals, are being protected. Similarly, human rights can benefit from deeply rooted ethical and spiritual foundations provided by religions or beliefs.
We understand our respective religious convictions as a source for the protection of the whole spectrum of inalienable human entitlements — from the preservation of the gift of life, the freedoms of thought, conscience, religion, belief, opinion and expression to the freedoms from want and fear, including from violence in all its forms.

We are convinced that our religions are fundamental sources of protection for human dignity and freedoms of all individuals and communities with no distinction on any ground whatsoever. Religious texts preceded international law in upholding humankind’s oneness, the sacredness of the right to life and the corresponding individual and collective duties that are grounded in the hearts of believers.

Our role is to disseminate the common human values that unite us and undertake to combat any form of exploitation of our differences to advocate violence, discrimination and religious hatred.

Only when religious actors, together with politicians and law-makers, assume their respective roles, articulate a shared vision of their responsibilities and transcend preaching to action, only then will we credibly promote mutual acceptance and fraternity among people of different religions or beliefs and empower them to defeat negative impulses of hatred, viciousness, manipulation, greed, cruelty and related forms of inhumanity. All religious or belief communities need a resolved leadership that unequivocally dresses that path by acting for everyone’s equal dignity, driven by our shared humanity and respect for the absolute freedom of conscience of every human being.

Today, and particularly in this region, religious leaders have a crucial role in speaking out firmly and promptly against intolerance, discriminatory stereotyping and instances of hate speech. They can promote constructive engagement in understanding of religious texts. Consequently, critical thinking and debate on religious matters should not only be tolerated but rather be encouraged as a requirement for enlightened religious interpretations in a globalized world composed of increasingly multi-cultural and multi-religious societies that are continuously facing evolving challenges.

Moreover, as politicians, it is your responsibility to prevent the use of the notion of “State religion” to discriminate against any individual or group and to consider any such interpretation as contrary to the oneness
of humanity and equal dignity of humankind. Similarly, the use of “doctrinal secularism” should be prevented from reducing the space for religious or belief pluralism in practice.

Since religious clerics and institutions have had a significant influence in guiding people to promote social cohesion, we need to reflect on mechanisms to promote the social responsibility of religious institutions with their various identities and doctrines in order to inculcate the concepts of citizenship on based on diversity, promotion of equality, freedom of religion and belief, and solidarity among religions, and in order to emphasize the civilizational role of all Middle Eastern communities in building peace.

One of the main challenges in this region remains to create a national identity while the political power has always been in the hands of a predominant religious group, partly destroying the national identity and promoting communitarianism.

Today a new communal narrative and a new social pact are needed in the Middle East. A narrative developed and shared by all communities, based on an inclusive and integrative understanding of citizenship and guaranteed by constitutions.

Today, you have the responsibility of bringing hope to the new generations. A hope that together, with our differences, with our diverse religious and cultural identities, we can live and prosper in the Love and grace given to us by God Almighty.

Thank you
Bismillah, Rrahman Rrahim!
In the name of God, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful.

Honorable Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament,
Honorary Secretary General of the Interparliamentary Assembly for Orthodoxy!

Dear organizers of the Conference!

IT IS A GREAT HONOR and pleasure for me to attend this Conference and to convey to you the name of the world’s Bektashi community, the best wishes to you and your families! The Supreme Lord reward us for our devotion in the long spiritual journey to universal peace! Of course, today’s theme about unity in diversity and fundamental freedom for Christians and Muslims in the Middle East is of particular importance in the background of wars of a religious, racial, or ethnic character. My perception is that these “heated fireplaces”, rather than interfaith surface conflicts, are held by economic and geostrategic factors, by various forces and interests, by eternal greed for earthly wealth. In this respect, I would say that our contribution to religious leaders in the whole Middle Eastern region is required to take on even greater responsibilities as an institution in the function of “extinguishing the flames” and measures for bringing peace to peace more durable. We disagree with anyone who questions that parliamentarism, as a representative institution of citizens and a field of formulating their religious and political demands has the
leading role in preserving and enriching the peoples traditions and spiritual indents.

Meanwhile, we cannot be sure that the connecting bridges between the parliaments and the spiritual aspirations of the peoples they represent are on the foundation of the steel, and are free of any risk, either internal or external. In this respect, I think that today’s Conference, through discussions, can be able to undertake concrete initiatives, particularly in the sustainable installation of the Creator’s faith and its link with civil society.

Until several decades ago, the Middle East was an example and testimony of a natural spiritually coexistence, where every religion or belief, nourished by the devotions of believers, has been able to travel for centuries.

The essence of religious coexistence, a concept which, beyond the will of God, is strictly maintained by human nature, is reflected in the fact that people called brothers those with whom the Most High put together, regardless of their race or color. This was one of the reasons that this region, taking in consideration of its nations and civilizations has offered the world in the past, great examples of spiritual and moral values.

While today’s reality in this region is shaky, it is also sad in terms of perspective. The light at the end of the tunnel is still not visible, while, especially in Syria, vandalisms do not seem to end. Thousands of innocent people have been killed in the ruins of cities, while hundreds of thousands are knocking on the doors of Europe, not for the sake of enforcing respect for human rights, but for the sake of the sacred life God gives us all. These people are taking a path of no return, and Europe, before starting to make cold-hearted calculations on the percentages of Christians and Muslims, it would be meaningful to invest with dignity towards aid and human solidarity, realizing these people’ ultimate sacrifices.

I think that today, more than ever, one must look to the great truths, far from the politicization of religions. The truths that pass through the events, see with our eyes, touch with our hands, share with our spirit. The heavier the weight of the truth is felt upon us, the more we will consider the games played in the ‘camp’ of temporary opponents. May the famous proverb “let God give you life and God take it” guide all of us hereafter.

During the 800-years-old of our faith, the Bektashis, maintain as an emblem of wickedness, the innocent children who were massacred in the
harsh land of Karbala centuries ago, merely because they supported the cause of Imam Husayn. However, we do not want Middle East become a modern caravan, due to the interests and desires of groups of financial oligarchs, or modern geo-strategic policies.

Finally, allow me to congratulate this conference, which stresses that parliamentarism’s priority and vision is the democratic principles of social cohesion. Personally, I would wish for a more realistic perception and more tolerant assessment for the support and strengthening of religions, convinced of their extraordinary role in the historic journey of every country.

In this context, the example of Albania, the example of my nation, is not only meaningful by itself, but has also been meaningful to other nations. By supporting, promoting and defending the most valuable elements of our religious heritage, we are closer to one another, we do more for each other, while, at the same time, we contribute to interfaith harmony and dialogue, as well as universal peace.

Thank you all!
God bless you! Amen!
Honourable participants,

SUCH INITIATIVES MEAN a lot to everyone in the Middle East, but also the world beyond it, as it touches on real scope for conflict-free coexistence with mutual respect between and among the representatives of the world’s biggest religions, primarily Christians and Muslims.

The I.A.O. agreed to have this conference on parliamentary dialogue, and the potential it offers, despite the fact that this symbiosis, and scope for peaceful coexistence without clashes but with mutual respect for one another and the world’s major religions and denominations, is centuries-old and has been dealt with in various ways by our ancestors.

We do realise that here, in the land of Lebanon, where not only the ancient Phoenicians have left an indelible mark, but there are still, today, monuments dating back to the Crusades, this kind of dialogue is key to living together on a relatively small piece of land that is home to the followers of many religions.

The fourteen years during which the civil war went on in Lebanon, causing irreparable damage to its growth and its people’s prosperity, are ample evidence of what successive conflicts between the biggest communities and their adherents can lead to.

The role which external powers often play may be summed up in the
ancient Roman strategy of “divide and rule”. A long conflict is now entering a new phase in Syria where, in truth, another civil war has started in fighting off the misanthropic entity which calls itself the Chalifate, a pseudo-state that is equally, or rather more, hostile to Muslims and Christians who are in favour of peaceful coexistence and its fundamental principles. We have realised by now it is imperative we do everything within our power, incl. the use of parliamentary practices, to avoid a further escalation and the deepening of the political juxtaposition so that Syria may get back to a peaceful life.

Unfortunately, no country is immune, be it big or small, to civil clashes. I would, nonetheless, like to point out that the most terrible form of political conflict is probably the one that revolves around a religious, or pseudo-religious, basis.

All religions aspire to good things and peace. We are, nevertheless, aware that, at times, social and religious leaders, or entire countries, see conflict and warfare as an opportunity to hold on to power. The Crusades, for instance, went on and on because Pope Urban II initiated them to tackle the internal challenges Europe was confronted with at the time.

I would, therefore, like to draw your attention to the policies my homeland, including our legislature, the State Duma and the Council of the Russian Federation, implements. You know we cannot sit back and watch what is happening to Syria. Hence, upon its government’s formal request, we made the decision to intervene to keep extremism and terrorism, which were taking advantage of the Syrian civil war, from spreading further.

The work to reconstruct Syria is now beginning. We know, only too well, that Christian communities in Syria have sustained dramatic losses. While refraining from a complete listing thereof, I should, nonetheless, highlight the damage to monasteries, monuments and other precious cultural masterpieces listed as world heritage. They were all desecrated during the war. And, what is most painful is that trust between the people has suffered irreparable damage. We, in Russia, are determined to do whatever it takes for all of that to soon be history.

In December 2017, Russian President Vladimir Putin met with His Beatitude John X, the Patriarch of Antioch and all of East. A few months later, President Putin met Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and King Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein of Jordan to discuss issues related to, among
others, the situation of the Christian populations in Middle Eastern countries. Similar meetings were also held with His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and all Russia.

As we speak, State Duma members are taking part in a process to get humanitarian aid to Syria and to establish interparliamentary dialogue.

We are rather optimistic after the Syrian National Dialogue Congress met on the 30th of January with practically all the representatives of every ethnic and religious group, including Christians living in Syria, in attendance.

Syria is not the sole country in the world where political aspirations or clashes unfortunately have a religious nuance. We are aware of the extent of the damage to the State of Egypt following the attacks on Coptic churches and the assassinations, as a result of terrorist attacks, of Christians practicing their religious duties or preparing to celebrate their holidays.

We do know about the trials and tribulations of the Christian populations in Iraq. The Christian community of Mosul used to have 300,000 members along with a total of 46 churches and monasteries, most of which are now in ruins. And although the Iraqi government and Haider al-Abadi, the PM, are trying to dispense justice by looking into the cases of Christian estates and property having been usurped to have the perpetrators punished, some meaningful progress has yet to be made.

Yemen is also having serious troubles. The civil war won’t stop and, moreover, Al-Qaeda affiliates and other terrorist groups are active there.

We were appalled when, recently, Israel caused the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to close for a few days. But even prior to that, the representatives of all the Churches there had come to decision after the City Authority in Jerusalem announced it would collect municipal property tax from them. Actually, the Knesset is debating over whether the law will be granting the State the right to auction off ecclesiastical assets, in Jerusalem and throughout Israel as a whole.

No doubt, we know of more such cases which, in my view, must be explicitly condemned by Orthodox Christian parliamentarians and Muslim MPs alike. We could possibly make a list of cases where Muslim rights have been violated but it would be preferable to get those who are better acquainted with the subject to make the list.
Let it be noted that I believe we, in Russia, are quite successful in protecting all religions and that although ours is mostly an Orthodox State (80% of the population is Russian and the Russians are Orthodox), we do grant permission to have mosques, synagogues and Buddhist monasteries built. As you know, Church and State are separate.

Let me, now, turn to my distinguished colleagues and urge them to heed the Declaration the Secretariat of the I.A.O. prepared for us. There is certainly scope for improvement but, overall, the text is to the point as to the need for interparliamentary dialogue and cooperation to put an end to violence in the Middle East, and across the world.

In the final analysis, who would wish to see “a clash of civilisations”, like Samuel Huntington pictured it in his book? I know we, in Russia, consider ourselves as heirs to various cultures and religious denominations and would not wish to watch anything remotely like that unfold. Thank you very much.
Honourable participants,

MANKIND ALMOST in total is shaken by successive tectonic shifts. In Africa, Asia, South America, even in Europe, hotspots of war and relentless conflict keep cropping up, causing thousands of victims, immense material damages and immeasurable retrogressions. Varied though the root causes of these disasters may be, their results are monotonously identical. The catastrophe is chaotic, widespread and diverse, its dire culmination being the millions of refugees who are forced to leave (or get violently expelled). In their effort to escape hunger, perhaps terror, tyranny at home and incursions from abroad, pauperisation, religious oppression, or maybe all of the above, they set their sights on other countries where they go in search for hope, their prospects being uncertain.

We, as Greeks, are highly sensitised in the face of such phenomena, having gone through quite a bit ourselves as migrants and refugees. For many centuries, we either needed or were forced to leave, to migrate, to go into exile or become refugees. And that is why our spiritual culture (the folk songs, ancient Greek epic poems and our poèmes en prose) refer, extensively, to refugees and their tragedy.

In lieu of other imagery, let me quote Plataicus, a speech by Isocrates, the famous Athenian orator, made before the Demos on behalf of the people of Platees over 2000 years ago:

Anastasios Nerantzis
Former Secretary General of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (I.A.O.), Representative of the official opposition in Greece
“But our greatest anguish of all is when one sees separated from each other, not only citizens from citizens, but also wives from husbands, daughters from mothers, and every tie of kinship severed; and this has befallen many of our fellow-citizens because of poverty. For the destruction of our communal life has compelled each of us to cherish hopes for himself alone.”

By way of conclusion to this brief analysis, I shall juxtapose it to Israel’s diaspora. Strabo mentions that at the time of Silas the Jewish element was present in every town. Several Jews had been established by Alexander the Great and Ptolemy I, King and Pharaoh, in Alexandria. Others were forced to leave their homeland behind because it was small or there was slavery but most of them, back then, left because they thought they could change their destiny by spreading to the four corners to get the wealth of the Earth and conquer the world.

One cannot help but wonder following this compilation:

What is it that needs to be done?

• First of all, for us to help, we need to try and find the core “tributaries” which irrigate, albeit weakly, relations between the Christian West (and not merely it, alone) with Islam.
• Between the two of them there is this deeply primitive intimacy of a shared “political” culture. Besides, “they stand for two opposing political models but their antithesis is limited solely to the kind of sacred Codex each of them wants to impose”.
• And, in any case, in both the West and Islam, “politics comes first and subjugates metaphysics to its own utilitarian purpose”, meaning that politics becomes self-standing.

Hence, states should shift their focus from defending human rights to expanding and deepening them. After all, in Greece we all agree that political rights without succinct and applicable sanctions, without a financial and social background, are a “fire that burns not” and “a light failing to shed light”.

At any event, a declaration of rights should be accompanied by an efficacious defense thereof. And yet, everyone knowledgeable in the workings of international organisations would readily agree they excel at big talk but are
desperately lagging behind in terms of making good on what they promise, either due to weakness or hypocrisy.

Last, some suggest that the illegal takeover of power and the doing-away of laws and freedoms in a state be dealt with as delictum sui generis. And, yet, it is not a matter of legislation. There is an abundance of laws. What is missing is volition. All of that has led some to the conclusion that our tough and subversive times are signaling “the end of history” or “the end of ideologies” or the “end of super powers”. They are wrong though.

Anyway, what we could possibly be hoping for is the following:

• An end to fake ideologies and the exploitation thereof.
• The advent of a revolution in thinking, leading to a need for more understanding and solidarity between people.
• Palpable progress in tolerating diversity and combating exclusion.
• An analytical presentation of the case for individual rights and freedoms and the protection thereof.
• Last, good faith and leniency in all state relations.

Furthermore, I wish to stress that liberal democracy encompasses a close intertwining of issues pertinent to freedom, equality, property and eventually democracy, which is why the fundamental ideological, political and legal precondition for the very existence of Democracy itself is a synthesis of two elements, freedom and equality.

These are, in brief, the elements and the thoughts which, in my opinion, must be duly noted by all who deal with the subject-matter of today’s conference in practical terms.

After all, why should there be delays or procrastination in making a rule of expelling, from the world community and global institutions, states that incite or provoke the aforementioned phenomena in any way or form? And, by way of concluding this brief speech, let me share a thought which actually runs through the subject of this Conference.

Indeed, in order for the fundamental principles of freedom to be clearly formulated, and to be upheld for the sake of Christians and Muslims in the Middle East, there is a dire need to engage all the Parliaments of the interested parties, the ones that draw the lines, in a sober conversation and to eventually make wise decisions. A precondition to that is the multifaceted
education of the parties involved for the sake of a solid democratic regime
since we see, unfortunately, these days such self-evident premises give way
to cheap talk, demagoguery and puns, vulgar expressions or even provoc-
avtive gestures and inarticulate cries. To think that, in ancient Greece, ac-
cording to Isocrates, the art of politics equaled philosophy, whilst, to Plato,
thinking was internal speech!

It is, after all, no news that democracy is an art based on a clash of words.
To that end, i.e. to preserve those limits and conditions, the members of
this Assembly can effortlessly play a duly positive role, both because of their
Christian views but also thanks to their culture. After all, the example of
Sergei Popov in moderating General Assemblies, Andreas Michailides in su-
pervising the organisation in his capacity of Secretary General, all their pre-
decessors, as well as the example of I.A.O. advisors, corroborate this view.

Happy Easter everyone!
Honourable participants,

FIRST OF ALL, I would like to extend my warmest thanks for the gracious invite to this interfaith conference and the hospitality the Lebanese Parliament provides us with.

Let me also thank the House of Representatives of the Republic of Cyprus for including me to the Cypriot delegation of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (I.A.O.) which I was a member of over a period of many years in different capacities, incl. my membership in the Financial Committee, among others.

Despite my having retired from active politics, I follow up on I.A.O. activities and issues of concern that are highly interesting, with emphasis on this year’s events to mark the 25th anniversary of the Organisation.

Interparliamentary relations are constantly evolving against the backdrop of shared principles and interesting subjects that are of mutual concern to us all. The I.A.O. provides opportunities to have further, more productive and fruitful exchanges at the level of parliaments, between and among the countries, which participate in this Organisation that Cyprus is a founding member of.

Since its inception, the I.A.O. has touched on various themes and subjects regarding the role Christian values and principles, human rights, interfaith dialogue, education, democracy and cultural heritage can play
in managing the crisis of our modern era and its impact within the context of technological advances and a globalised economy.

At the same time, critical subjects, such as the refugee and migrant crisis and terrorism, especially with regard to threats to the survival of historically old communities across the Middle East, have been and are still of concern to our Interparliamentary Assembly.

To quote Ms. Athena Papadopoulou, a member of TCCH Cyprus, the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage, “the churches and the mosques are unbreakably intertwined with the daily life of people, their belief in God, their land, memories and identity”.

Our subject today, “Unity in Diversity and Fundamental Freedoms for Christians and Muslims”, is very topical and timely. Allow me to insist on “unity in diversity” and “fundamental freedoms” because for them to apply there must be “mutual respect”, and in particular “respect for human rights”.

Let me remind the Assembly that Art. 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights suggests that every individual has a right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion as well as the freedom to, publicly or privately, alone or with others, demonstrate religion or religious beliefs through teaching, practicing religious rituals and worship.

Today, as long as we wish to get to the essence of the subject at hand, let us not be afraid to comment on reality. Let us not bury our heads in the sand, unless we want to refrain from getting to the root cause of the real problem.

Dear participants, former colleagues,
Indeed, unity in diversity and the fundamental freedoms for Christians and Muslims, especially in the Middle East where we also live, are a big issue.

The growth and activity of ISIS create challenges and so does the strong fanaticism fostered, in a criminal manner, by some governments in neighbouring countries which violate human rights and infringe upon the religious rights of the people who are under occupation.

The 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the event of armed conflict says, in its preamble, that “damage to cul-
tural property belonging to any people whatsoever means damage to the
cultural heritage of all mankind.”

Cyprus, my homeland, is a country with unique history and an an-
cient civilization dating back to 9000 BC. Due to its location, it converted
to Christianity early and it is, therefore, home to one of the biggest collec-
tions of Byzantine art in the world. A significant number of churches,
chapels and monasteries have paleochristianic and mediaeval mosaics,
murals and icons that are priceless.

One of the saddest repercussions of the Turkish invasion and the ille-
gal occupation of 37% of Cypriot territory since 1974 is the violent and
systematic destruction of cultural and religious heritage in the occupied
territory of Cyprus. Hundreds of historic and religious monuments have
been destroyed, pillaged and vandalised.

Official statistics and evidence compiled by the Republic of Cyprus in-
dicate that over 500 Greek Orthodox churches and chapels as well as 17
monasteries, in towns and villages in the occupied part of Cyprus, have
been pillaged, or were intentionally vandalised and even demolished in
some cases. No one knows what has become of their ecclesiastical items
and where 15,000 portable icons may be. According to police estimates,
more than 60,000 ancient artifacts have been illegally exported to coun-
tries abroad since 1974. The most priceless icons were purchased by auc-
tion houses and sold illegally by art dealers across the globe.

The fact that over 133 churches, chapels and monasteries have been
desecrated, 77 churches were turned into mosques, 28 are being used
as warehouses or barracks and hospitals by Turkish troops and 13 were
turned into either storage rooms or barns clearly demonstrates that re-
ligious and cultural heritage in the northern part of Cyprus has sys-
tematically been targeted by the occupation regime. The conversion, in
particular, of the church of Aghia Paraskevi in the occupied town of
Lapithos (in Kyrenia) into a luxury resort and casino as well as the cur-
rent use of the Armenian monastery of Sourp Magar, which dates to the
Middle Ages, as a coffee shop prove, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the
unlawful intentions of the occupying forces. Furthermore, such actions
and activities are evidence of the fact that not only the Orthodox Church
but also the Armenian and the Roman Catholic Church of Cyprus have
been victims to the pillaging and have suffered extensive damage.
As time went by, next to the Orthodox Christian element appeared the Muslim, the Armenian, the Roman Catholic and the Maronite Christian element in Cyprus. The lawful State has always been respectful of the religious beliefs of every one of its citizens without exception. The Republic of Cyprus fully respects and promotes unity in diversity and the fundamental freedoms of Christians and Muslims as well as the freedoms of other religious communities, the Armenian, the Roman Catholic and the Maronite, in practice.

Unlike the occupation regime and the attitude of Turkey, after 1974 the custodian for all Turkish-Cypriot and Muslim religious and cultural monuments is the Minister of the Interior of the Republic of Cyprus. All monuments are duly protected and looked after so that the Muslim populations living on the territory of the Republic of Cyprus, including Turkish-Cypriots who reside in the occupation zone, may be free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies. The Turkish occupation regime is doing the exact opposite: it prohibits religious ceremonies from being held in our occupied churches, with merely a handful of exceptions which were only made possible thanks to the great pains that the Church and the Republic of Cyprus took.

Although the issue of Cyprus has always been political and never religious, the occupation forces are violating every International Agreement, declaration and principle on the free expression of the religious beliefs by all communities.

Following huge efforts to get it set up, a few years ago TCCH Cyprus began its work. Thus the two communities, the Greek-Cypriot and the Turkish-Cypriot, assisted by UNESCO, are jointly proceeding to the restoration and conservation of religious monuments and sites of worship, both Christian and Muslim, throughout Cyprus.

This is a very positive step which is, nonetheless, the result of co-operation and mutual respect between Christian and Muslim technical staff, scholars and experts. Despite that, the occupation regime often creates impediments to hinder the work of the TCCH.

Dear Participants,
Parliaments, the world over, can activate parliamentary diplomacy to prop up interfaith initiatives that help understand each other, as per our
Conference’s Declaration, and eliminate obstacles to unity in diversity and the fundamental freedoms of Christians and Muslims in Cyprus until a much-desired solution to the Cyprus issue may be found.

We also look forward to receiving stronger support from the countries that are both Arab Interparliamentary Union and I.A.O. members.

Last, let us hope that the conclusions of this Conference will be fully utilised and may the adoption of the common Declaration mark the start of renewed relations between the I.A.O. and PUIC.
Your Eminences and Graces,
Your Excellencies,
dear participants,
ladies and gentlemen,

OUR CONFERENCE IS TAKING PLACE in Lebanon, in one of the most sensitive areas in the Middle East the political ambiance of which determines prosperity and stability in other countries in this important part of the world. This Conference is mostly focused on unity and diversity for Christians and Muslims, and I am, therefore, going to elaborate on the problems of interfaith dialogue between Christianity and Islam since its progress, in Lebanon and the Middle East, can impact on the entire global political process. The mere existence of such dialogue, let alone the advancement thereof, can indicate scope for positive prospects in world politics.

It is no accident that Lebanon was chosen as the venue for our Conference since the confessional map of this small country reflects, and quite accurately so, an image of equilibrium as well as the significance of interfaith relations in the Middle East. The shared birthplace of both Christianity and Islam is here, in the outskirts of Lebanon. Many great pages in the history of the two religions which, over the centuries, have shaped the character of major global developments and are playing, to this day, a significant role in the life of all humankind, are intertwined with this region. Analysing scope
for interfaith dialogue across the Middle East today can affect global developments in the future.

Let it be highlighted, nonetheless, that in recent years the Middle East has been the theatre of warfare, big and small, with many countries depending on its intensity, though some of them are not even in the region. In essence, all of the core global players have, more or less, been involved in local developments rapidly unfolding in the Middle East. They have their own agendas, be they financial, military, strategic, home and foreign policy-related and others, all of which reverberate through the world.

Undoubtedly, such agendas include religious and interfaith interests pursued by countries such as Iran, Turkey, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Yemen and Iraq, which, openly or stealthily, have the support of world class political giants, incl. the U.S.A., Russia, the U.K., the E.U. (first and foremost, France and Germany) as well as Israel, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and others.

A topical global problem – the millions of refugees flocking to Europe from the Middle East and N. Africa - has a religious dimension, too. To say the least, religious persecutions are among the reasons why refugees are coming en masse to Europe. Given that, the start and the continuation of a dialogue between Christians and Muslims can be a timely step to help bring some order to the world. Nonetheless, modern international practices followed in this part of the globe not only show there is no actual dialogue but that it is rather unlikely to have it in the foreseeable future. Despite peaceful relations between Christians and Muslims at the lowest, interpersonal, traditional and communal level, between and among the people of Syria, Iraq or Egypt, for example, there is no dialogue at the highest level, i.e. across institutions, churches or states, nor does it seem feasible in the near future.

The only exception is Lebanon and its three main religious communities, the Christian, the Shiite and the Sunni, who are managing, thanks to their political and religious leadership, albeit with some degree of difficulty, to stay on top of the situation and promote, step by step, the dialogue between Christians and Muslims as a basis for the integrity of this country and its relative sociopolitical stability. Notwithstanding, the integrity and stability of Lebanon are being targeted by several enemies who are either nearby, in the vicinity, or far away from its borders.

Who is it that does not wish for stability and peace in the Middle East
and who is, consequently, hindering interfaith dialogue? It is no secret that the main, but not the only, destabilising paragon in the region is the United States.

A dialogue between Christians and Muslims would be more effective were there no intense internal religious conflicts and complications within Islam, and if, inside the Muslim world, fundamentalists and extremists did not prevail. After all, they are the ones who, in principle, would refuse to have any kind of conversation with the Christians and see no reason to come to an understanding with the Ahl al-Kitāb, the people of the scriptures.

Fundamentalist and extremist forces may be hindering scope for relations with the Christians but then, as is widely known, there is no dialogue within Islam either. Currently the Sunni, especially traditional or moderate fractions, radical Salafis and Wahhabis (ihvan) are clashing hard and uncompromisingly between themselves, or with others, while being supported and influenced from abroad by specific people with an agenda of their own.

It is no secret that the Wahhabis (or ihvan), who were born a few decades ago in Saudi Arabia out of an Egyptian extremist organisation, the Muslim Brotherhood, are troubling the authorities of Saudi Arabia today. Both the Muslim Brotherhood, who Field Marshal Abdel Fattah Saeed Hussein Khalil el-Sisi is fighting against, after having been re-elected President, as well as the Wahhabis, which have become a problem for the Royal House of the Saudis, have been nurtured by and are still closely associated with Western secret services, first and foremost American and British ones who are using them to pursue their own self-serving agenda by destabilising the entire Sunni Umma (religious community).

Saudi Arabia, being most powerful in the Arab world, is trying to dominate and suppress other Sunni communities. It is staunchly opposed to the Shiite, mostly, and envisages Iran as its archenemy, including everyone who associates with it in the process: the Shiite government in Iraq, the Alawite leadership of Syria, the Shiite community of Lebanon headed by Hezbollah, the Houthi revolutionary movement of “Ansar Allah” from Yemen and the Shiite Kurds.

The real leader of modern Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, made state visits to the U.K and the U.S.A. to get support for his
policy in the region. As a result, President Trump signed off to selling him more arms. American sales of armaments are expected to skyrocket following the signing of deals worth $109 billion. Over the next ten years the U.S. is bound to supply the Saudi Kingdom with 350 billion dollars worth of weapons. No one expects the bellicose Saudis to use such huge heaps of weapons of mass destruction for peaceful purposes.

Meanwhile, let us not overlook the fact that the U.S. administration supports Saudi rule over the region in public and sides with the Yemeni Houthis behind the scenes. It secretly provides the latter with weapons by means of third parties while challenging the Saudis through cunning appeals launched by Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Hizera Naouer-ta during political negotiations with Yemeni rebels. This is unacceptable for Mohammed Bin Salman who is determined to defeat Yemen thanks to his big military deals with the U.S.A.

An armaments race in the Middle East can be profitable and very useful from a political point of view for the United States. Contracts to supply the Saudis with weapons equal 120,000 new jobs for American companies. It is what Donald Trump needs to get himself re-elected after he promised his voters to restart the economy and the manufacturing sector by reviving the U.S. rust-belt.

The orders Saudi Arabia, Iran, Jordan, Egypt and Israel are placing for arms and military supplies should help the U.S. improve its economic standing to eventually start addressing an imbalance there is in its relations with China, which is giving America a headache. In 2017, the trade deficit between China and the United States rose to $396 billion. Presently nobody knows how to correct it but, by having tension escalate in the Middle East, the U.S. military industrial complex can get to work full speed again. This, in turn, could benefit the industrial and the financial might of the U.S.A., which has been visibly shaken. And that is why, from now on, the U.S. will be going down its standard path of wreaking havoc throughout the Middle East, by breaking up, for instance, the Sunni Muslims in Egypt with the help of the Muslim Brotherhood, sowing the seeds of discord inside Sunni communities, and entire states that hold similar views on religion if need be, to make sure it sells huge quantities of weapons to Sunni countries engaged in the clash.

To the U.S., it is equally critical to get the Sunni and the Shiite to the
brink of conflict, starting with a clash between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Let it be noted that yet another standard player, Israel, has been more vocal in this game. Although it is working with the Saudis against Iran behind the scenes, its agenda has nothing to do with a dialogue within Islam.

Another influential player is Turkey, a country having the biggest military capacity within NATO and a stake in the region. It actually wishes to bring Kurdish militia in neighbouring Syria and Iraq to their knees because the Kurds aspire to have their own state, among others, in what is currently Turkish territory. Needless to say, Sunni Turkey has been having problems with its local Kurdish population of 30 million, a big part of which is actually Shiite Kurds, and the Kurds in Iraq and Syria.

There are, moreover, some serious interfaith juxtapositions between Turkey and the Druze, the Assyrians and others. Its standard practice so far has been to have zero tolerance for mutually acceptable religious priorities. It may be surmised that, in the foreseeable future, Turkey is probably neither making an appearance on the global arena brandishing the banner of a peacemaker in religious affairs, nor is it going to make an appeal for interfaith dialogue.

As we speak, there are many reasons to think that the millions of refugees coming to Europe from the Middle East and North Africa are not acting spontaneously, unlike what the mass media are trying to suggest. Europe is now awakening to the fact. The liberal pro-American political elites were not successful in confusing European citizens for long. The election in Germany and the slump of Ms. Angela Merkel’s political party have clearly demonstrated that the citizens of Europe are beginning to grasp the essence of developments. Nor was it random that Chancellor Merkel, in her first public statement on behalf of the newly-elected German government, admitted to her people “something is changed in this country”!

What has changed is that the citizens are beginning to realise that certain perceptions on the nature of mass refugee inflows, which statespeople and global media have ushered in, are actually fake. The real reason why refugees are leaving the Middle East is not Bassar al-Assad, “the despotic tyrant”, but a big clash and its interfaith backdrop that is being kindled purposefully through the involvement of a custom-made monster the Americans created, the “Islamic State”.

We should be straightforward about Great Britain, too. For centuries,
it has been interested in developments in the Middle East. By the way, at the start of the 20th century, it founded, through a combination of its intelligence resources and colonial administration, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt to divide and break people’s resistance but it now has no serious military capacity to pursue its objectives. Nowadays, Britain is using the popular and well-tried method of large-scale provocation. It is a systematic agent provocateur working methodically, no matter the circumstances, to exit the European Union, which is losing its impetus and significance, while utilising tricky machinations to throw the Continent into the flames of the Middle Eastern conflict to debilitate it.

British intelligence is interested anew in both the Muslim Brotherhood, which it helped establish in the past, and wahhabism, the offspring of the Brotherhood, in all its forms. In the meantime, in several other states, including Russia, among others, prudent religious leaders such as, for instance, the head of the Muslims in Tatarstan, Mufti Kamil Samigullin, are making an appeal to have radical entities, and their misanthropic ideology which verges on fascism, banned by law. It is no accident that the Muslim SS forces spiritual leader, back at the time of World War II, was Amin al-Husseini of the Muslim Brotherhood. But the Brits refuse to assume responsibility for what they have bred themselves.

It is critical today, for the perfidious and selfish Albion, in the framework of its covering up the true meaning of Brexit, to be operating elsewhere, to try to bury a world class scandal and to, among others, protect the interests of its biggest customer, the U.S.A. This is why the British, with help from the Americans, are conniving to set up a huge international political scam span around the story of the alleged “poisoning” of Sergei Skripal, a double agent, and his daughter Yulia, in Salisbury, a suburb of London, a story they fabricated from scratch to promptly and duly incriminate Russia. Britain is becoming again, much like it was in 1946, a leading player in the new Cold War against Russia.

The British, by twisting the arms of E.U. member-states, the very Union they walked out on cunningly and preemptively, were successful in forcing the Europeans to approve of measures of diplomatic extortion and pressure on Russia, which are actually not to the benefit of Europe. It turns out this is just the beginning of their stratagem. An even more cunning plan is in store, another provocation was staged at the behest of America to make
Russia look guilty of allegedly launching chemical weapons attacks against the Syrian opposition. This is yet another ruse to make the end to hostilities and civil war in Syria impossible for a long time.

It goes without saying that we cannot talk of interfaith dialogue in the Middle East in such a context. But this seemingly strange “package”, with its powerful yet hollow and unfounded fuss about the “poisoning” which was actually staged by the British, was commissioned by the United States who are ready to “transact”.

In the final analysis, what is inside the “package” the Brits made? It is thin air, a foolish and loud roar. With their typical British dexterity they are giving their “package” to the Americans who, in turn, take it hoping to bait the Russians, as has been the case before, time and again, in modern times.

Hence the U.S.A. advise the Russians to pay the price for the clamour, which could end right now as long as they withdraw from Syria and Donbass and discontinue the production of a new generation of Russian armaments that the Americans do not have just yet. Each one of the players is playing his own game and all, except for Russia, are anything but interested in fostering interfaith dialogue.

Similarly to that, there are many parties in this world who not only are uninterested in having a wide-ranging dialogue between Christians and Muslims in the Middle East but their true intent is to not allow it to ever materialise in any form or shape altogether. Let it be underscored, yet again: the fact of the matter is that there is one party, currently involved in developments in the Middle East, who objectively cares about stability in the region and that, in addition, there can be no stability unless there is an end to interfaith conflict. The aforementioned party is Russia, against which a hybrid world war is being waged on all fronts, spanning the ideological, financial, military and even the diplomatic field.

And what is Russia calling for? It is calling for a ceasefire, a truce and negotiations. This is the objective of the talks which started on its initiative in Sochi and Astana. No doubt, this is the framework within which the Seventh MCIS (Moscow Conference on International Security) will be taking place in Moscow on April 4. The MCIS is expected to help draw conclusions about the fight against Islamist radical militants in Syria as well as to facilitate dialogue on the prospects of ridding the region of the so-called Islamic State. Unfortunately, we cannot talk about dialogue today. It is a
well-known fact that conferences and debates are a long way from real dialogue as such.

Dialogue means working towards rapprochement, bringing the positions of two or more parties closer, be they differing or similar as to their dynamics, as long as they are equally interested in working together.

Negotiations, for their most part, signify forcing people to make peace, the powerful pushing the weak to come to an agreement on critical issues that the strongest insists on.

Today, sadly, it is not yet time to have a dialogue, scope for which is now limited in the Middle East where there is hardly any Christian population left to table issues on their own, to tackle the items on the negotiation agenda with the Muslim and to agree on acceptable terms and conditions for the region. And yet, this is exactly what needs to happen because the Middle East is, as we all know, the cradle of Christianity.

There must be a new balance of powers in the region based on justice and equality and it is imperative that Russia be part of the process. Still, this is not about equality in numbers; it is about equity based on historical truth and the fair interests of peoples and states, and even the rest of the globe. Truth and stability in the Middle East is what the world truly needs since this is a fragile part in a cultural fissure threatening to drag our planet into a destructive conflict.

By way of conclusion, a few words on freedom, the core subject of our Conference. Freedom, as global practice shows, is not given away as a gift from above but people have to struggle for it. In essence, all of the Middle Eastern countries are going through a new phase in their fight for independence, freedom to choose where to go and sovereignty.

Within this framework, religion plays a huge, if not decisive, role. It determines national identity and, therefore, shapes the meaning of spiritual and cultural values which typically characterise people. And that is why the struggle for national and state sovereignty is a struggle for religious and cultural identity. It is the field where the battles of the future will take place. Some magnificent battles for the future of the world lie ahead of us and the time for dialogue has yet to come.

Thank you for your attention.
I greet you all.

THOSE OF US WHO ARE GATHERED here stand for the highest representative bodies of our countries and, therefore, in our capacity as politicians, we ought to look at the political means we have. All the more so now that we are discussing the fundamental principles of freedom in these two great worlds, the Christian and the Muslim, in the 21th century, as we search for unifying ideas and values to keep us together in our diverse society.

The Middle East is known as the cradle of many civilisations and religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). We are in a country known for its ethnic religious diversity, to which the existence of a peculiar confessional political system is due. My own homeland, Georgia, in the Caucasus, is also known for its ethnic and religious diversity, the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia having played a very important role in its long history.

The aforementioned is evidence that religions, regardless of continent or areas where they spread, are a factor that shapes state entities and international relations. Accordingly, the role of religions must be examined with the same set of tools, and in an equally thorough manner, like we would do were we to look into the role of other sectors of political activity.

One of the tools is geopolitics. Upon looking at religion from a political point of view, it would be valid to claim that to interpret international developments, where there seems to be some religious component, it is nec-
ecessary to also take geopolitics into account. In addition to that, religions, because of their singular nature, are special political tools and determine priorities.

Let us, for example, look at the Middle East and the European Union: an attempt to change the map of nations in the country that is our host, i.e. to change the state and its political form, led to a civil war which is still going on as we speak. The pretext for changing the map was the confessional/religious background, which was a serious problem for Middle Eastern countries. As for the European Union and its member states, their experience spans long decades and proves it is possible for a population of many nations and various religions to live peacefully together.

Religion should not be an instrument of political exploitation serving goals which have nothing to do with the salvation of the soul. Actually, a renowned American analyst said “religion would always and forever be used, wherever possible, to mobilise societies and justify grand military operations and conflicts.”

Unfortunately, fundamentalists are known to often turn revered texts into political tools, as was the case, for instance, in the United States where, in the 19th century, the debate on slavery often resorted to biblical quotes to justify slave-ownership.

When it comes to the political role of religion, what really matters is the distinction between religions that are passive and those which take on an active role. Religions that are passive are not in a position to take independent political initiatives on unity in diversity. Whenever they become political tools, followers possibly adopt positions that are the exact opposite of what is acceptable, i.e. terror.

And therefore, in order for us to find what unites us, it is important to have a constructive political and interfaith dialogue. In decision-making, we must follow the top and most fundamental principle: we all have one house to share, planet Earth, and it would be disastrous for ourselves, the people living in it, to destroy the house through endless war and conflict. We must put an end to ethnic-based religious fundamentalism and violent extremism everywhere. It might be difficult to do so in a small expanse of

1. Graham E. Fuller is an American author and political analyst specialising in Islamic extremism.
land where many religions might have gathered but nothing is impossible. If we really mean business, then there is a simple formula: let us try to see ourselves in the other person and wish for them only what we would wish for us.

Many perceive the notions of “Unity” and “Union” as twisted forms of what is universal and totalitarian. In addition, since the time of classical sophist thought and all the way to the times of modern-day atheists, there was the dominant view that religions preaching an Absolute Unity with God led to juxtaposition and fanaticism against people with different points of view. So, the fight for the truth limited itself to classifying ideas and actions as “good” or “evil”, “acceptable” or “inacceptable”, “legitimate” or “illegitimate”. This differentiation is tearing people apart, escalating tensions between them despite the fact they have so much in common. People love their parents the same way, they love their children and their friends; they are happy in similar ways, they take pleasure in the success of their loved ones and have identical ways of wishing them a happy and peaceful future. The problem is that it is difficult for people to perceive their ideological opponents as peers and to be tolerant to one another. Religion must support and teach them how to live peacefully next to one another. This is exactly the first conceptual correction that we definitely need to make, as statespeople.

There is a huge difference between unity and similarity. No matter how interesting, diverse and versatile cultures may be between them, they applaud unity and mutual respect. It is the same with nature where there is amazing diversity and yet there is natural harmony and unity in everything. Our identity and our uniqueness breed individualism but, regardless of that, we are united by a common and proud word : “the human being”.

People are not part of an artificially-made system. You cannot give people a serial number. We are united in our obligation to recognise moral and ethical rules, part of which is respect and tolerance vis-à-vis the religious identity of others. We are all connected and we are all part of a bigger whole and that is a useful tool for political governance.

In addition, in 1998, at the Oslo Conference on Freedom of Religion and Belief, a declaration was adopted recognising that religion teaches peace and what is good and that, nonetheless, at the same time, religion
and belief could be used in the wrong way, leading to intolerance, discrimination and prejudice, which are also quite often used to refute and deny other people their rights and freedoms. The Declaration also stated that all people ought to condemn discrimination and intolerance based on religious grounds to help support human dignity and peace instead.

I believe this particular responsibility multiplied by a hundred is ours and that we, politicians, should be perfecting legislation to make it more flexible. It is necessary to do so to make sure that, on the one hand, no one may undermine peace using religion or persecute women and children and minorities and, on the other hand, so as not to allow for religious persecution, or violence against people because of their religion and convictions.

I can proudly state that Georgia has always been renowned for its religious tolerance. Many attendees know that in our capital city, Tbilisi, there are Christian churches, a mosque and a synagogue, situated close to one another. Throughout the history of my country, never were there religious persecutions. Our neighbours, the Russians, the Armenians, the Ossetians and the Azeri Muslims, for years and years, have been working side-by-side with Georgian citizens, having no religious or national bone to pick with the locals.

It pains my heart to think about the conflicts that were artificially caused in Georgia, their background being nationalistic and political, culminating in the occupation of Abkhazia and the region of Tskhinvali. We are trying, through peaceful means, to have Russia uphold the August 12, 2008 agreement, to remove its troops from Georgia and get international peacekeeping forces in place instead.

Religions suggest a shared view on reality since there is one Maker and the reality He made, in turn, has to be shared and integral. This is a fundamental premise and the foundation of Judaism, Christianity, Islam and also Hinduism and Buddhism. So, we, as politicians, must rely on exactly this type of unity since, according to the definition of home affairs and foreign policy, the Parliament, meaning us, is entrusted with the duty to represent the interests of our voters, be they Christian or Muslim.

Thank you for your attention.
Honourable Mr. Speaker,
ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues.

LET ME THANK AGAIN, as I stand at the
podium of this International Conference, the
authorities of beautiful Lebanon for their gen-
erous hospitality.

This country, in spite of adversity, is a par-
adigm of coexistence between different reli-
gions and denominations. This is a country of
truly open, hospitable and optimistic people.
It is obvious as soon as one gets to Beirut.

I consider it a stroke of luck for us all to be part of such an important
gathering of different cultures and religions, Muslims and Christians, who
cherish the same desire for mutual understanding, support and attune-
ment.

I do realise that within each of us there is a common starting point,
shaped by the shared experiences of our past which permeate our ines-
capably shared itinerary towards the future.

As you can probably recall, at the end of the 20th century, a theory that
was hugely influential on political elites, and the so-called think-tanks, was
Huntington’s thesis on future wars and the clash of civilisations. Accord-
ing to it, the world consisted of distinct parts, with state religions in each,
and it was only to be expected that states would eventually fight between
them to overpower one another.
In the meantime, and over the years, we saw the symptoms of a clash based on religion. We, moreover, saw religious fanaticism and intolerance increase, terrorist attacks multiply and extremist groups prevail over big expanses of land as did, for example, Daesh in Syria, Iraq and certain parts of Africa.

It is safe to draw two conclusions from such phenomena:

First, they are greatly due to the wrong policies being exercised by certain powers in areas, such as the Middle East, leading to feelings of injustice and hatred.

Second, religious intolerance, i.e. the absence of tolerance vis-à-vis the religious identity of our fellow human being, is detrimental, first and foremost, to the very countries where such trends have grown to gigantic proportions.

Behind them, yet again, there are varying degrees of vested interests that could not care less about the fate of the peoples.

Suffice it to say what is actually happening in Iraq and Syria proves that much.

- Who was it that allowed Daesh and other extremist groups, the members of which come from dozens of states, to grow to such proportions?
- Was there no other way for solutions to be found to the problems of the Middle East that we had to have this Armageddon with hundreds of thousands of casualties and the millions of refugees?
- And why is it that, to this day, a path for peace has yet to be found for life to get back to normal?

Unfortunately, lessons have yet to be learned. One recent incident I would like to condemn and denounce, all the more so from inside the Parliament of Lebanon, is the destruction of both the tomb of St. Maron, the patron saint of the Maronites, and the 4th century Church of St. Julianus when Turkey bombarded Afrin.

Such barbaric acts are part of a genocidal, memory-killing, policy which is enforced in Turkey but also in the occupied part of Cyprus. It is the tactics that intolerant groups and organisations, like Daesh, use in an effort to wipe out the admirable religious and cultural pluralism of the Middle East.
Dear friends,
as a Hellene, Yunan and Rum with a strong byzantine consciousness, my grandparents having been Cappadocian refugees who came to Greece from Asia Minor, I have a heightened sense of our affinities and ties with the East. I see the cultural substrate in people and think in terms of human beings beyond their national and religious identities, which is indeed why I am positive there is a lot we can do together in spite of the adverse circumstances. The future of our children cannot be about war and fear, hatred and killings. Their future should be about cooperation and coexistence, prosperity and growth.

The world community ought to be a catalyst in dealing with antithesis in a positive manner. Other mentalities are prevailing instead, though, and we have sadly come to a point where some are, unreasonably, pushing for another Cold War through new divides, entrenchments, economic sanctions as well as unprecedented deportations of diplomats.

This negative environment fatally exacerbates regional competition and clashes. It is our duty to respond to the challenges of our times, to demolish those artificial walls and to prop up the forces of co-working by capitalising on our rich traditions and historical heritage to begin with.

Let us forge new and strong cooperation ties.

Dear friends,
everything I heard here, in Beirut and in Lebanon, has made me more optimistic than I was upon arriving for I realised there are more of us who wish to move and go forward, towards a world with more justice, freedom, tolerance and understanding for one another. No doubt, all I.A.O. members are in agreement and, exactly like we have done so far, we shall continue to work together in the future.
Dear Members of the Bureau, 
dear participants and guests.

I WISH TO START WITH ACKNOWL-
EDGEMENTS to our Lebanese hosts for the 
warm welcome to their homeland where the 
Code of Justinian was born, the land that is 
home to the place the greatest book on Earth, 
the Bible, was named after.

Let it be stressed that Christianity, which is 
thought to be the religion of the West, was ac-
tually born here in the East, where the notions 
of community, destiny and pride for belonging to and coming from the 
Holy Land first emerged as being relevant to Christians and Muslims. 
They are both highly sensitised vis-à-vis the Holy Land, and the latter 
cherish and venerate Jesus the prophet.

Let me underscore that, throughout history, Christians have been an 
important social and cultural group for the Muslim world. Nonetheless, 
since the last decades of the 20th century and throughout the 21st, the 
standing of Christianity in this region - I am talking about the East- has 
been in a downward spiral. The main reason why is obvious: the West, 
mostly the United States, wish to fully subjugate this strategically import-
ant, uniquely rich, part of the world to turn it into its own sphere of influ-
ence.
Unfortunately, over the past decade, the problem of Christian persecutions has become global. Christian populations are discriminated against and openly persecuted almost everywhere in the world. I shall not dwell on statistical data though I feel compelled to stress the fact that the situation has been getting worse, here, in the Middle East, where, since the start of the armed conflict in Syria, the number of Christians in Syria has dropped from over two to about one million.

We could talk about persecutions in Iraq and let us not forget about the predicament of the Christian populations of Israel and Palestine where discrimination has been the norm. For example, in Jerusalem, in 1948, there were 27,000 Christians whereas today (just think!) there are only 6,000 left. In Ramallah, the capital city of the Palestinian Authority, where Christians used to be 90%, they hardly exceed 10% nowadays. The aforementioned data testify to the “de-cristianisation” of the Holy Land. It is obvious that the problem of Christian persecution is becoming a genocide throughout the world.

Russia and the Slavic world cannot help but watch a tragedy unfold in Ukraine as the Ukrainian establishment, instructed by its bosses on the other side of the Atlantic, systematically persecutes the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. Churches are being set on fire and priests murdered in Donbass. Unfortunately, all over the world, extremist powers are taking advantage of religion.

Another important element is the persistent and consistent work of certain, usually pro-western, forces who aspire to have Christian traditional values replaced by so-called “universal” ones. Christian values, though, play a major part in preserving our mentality and traditional moral foundations without which it is impossible to have a healthy and robust society.

Each person has a conscience. It is our nature, morality being a true foundation for people. We were born with it regardless of cultural differences between peoples and institutions. Our conscience has nothing to do with universal values that were designed, and may be ameliorated, to serve this or that economic interest. And our part in supporting the Christians, especially our role in lawmaking, is exceptionally important.

Let me, by way of example, mention a motion by my party, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, which brought to the Duma a decree, based
on lessons history taught us and how oppression in today’s world should not be tolerated, to ensure the protection of Christian communities.

Generally speaking, Russia’s experience and role in interfaith dialogue is of major importance. The Russian Federation is one of the biggest multinational and pluri-denominational countries in the world. With its uniquely rich and versatile ethnic and religious composition, Russia is home to 200 ethnicities, speaking 277 different dialects and languages.

The subject of the Conference is close to my heart because I was born and raised in Bashkiria, a Muslim Republic and a member of the Federation that may even be described as a miniature Russian Federation. Ours is a Republic with more than 130 ethnicities and 6 religious denominations. I must underline the long history of Christians and Muslims living together on Bashkirian territory for centuries. We often wish each other “Happy holidays”. The Christians wish Muslims “Kourban Bayram”, the Muslims wish Christians “Merry Christmas” and “Happy Easter”.

In addition, there has been an increase in the number of Muslims diving into the cold river waters during the Blessing of the Waters on Holy Epiphany. Do take stock of such interaction in my country, and the Republic of Bashkiria, in particular, where there is even an ad hoc council for interfaith and religious affairs, the head of which is the regional governor.

The two biggest religious communities in Bashkiria are the Christian and the Muslim. 67% of the population is Muslim, 22% is Christian. No one oppresses the other though. They all live peacefully together like friends. This is the positive experience Russia and my own Republic wish to share. Let me, moreover, underline that the government approved of a program to host a series of events aimed to introduce the notions of religious culture and secular ethics into the curriculum.

There is a problem, which is huge in our Republic and a big issue, I think, for the rest of the World as, sadly, extreme nationalist groups appeal to young people to join them and that is very dangerous. They address the youth, in general, and especially the young who are socially vulnerable or poor. And there is, unfortunately, this formula of “ignorance coupled to religion leading to terrorism” that has proven to work very well for people who endorse extreme Islamic ideas. This is exactly why we have put together the aforementioned program of events for Bashkiria
and the rest of the Federation. Our fundamental concern is to protect and preserve ethics and moral values in today’s world.

No doubt the persecution of Christians in the Middle East by Muslim terrorist organisations also started due to serious intervention on the part of the U.S. administration in the home affairs of Arab states in the region, which in turn led to chaos and the overthrowing of legitimate governments, the overarching goal being to wipe out Christianity as well as moderate Islam from the entire region.

What can we possibly do then? I believe we must take advantage of international experience. First of all, we have to capitalise on the Russian experience, including the example of the Republic of Bashkiria. We need to understand that a war is being waged to win over the souls of the people, to force them to choose sides, good or evil. And that is, of course, something our organisation must have a say in since it is called upon to facilitate global interfaith understanding and to help bring world peace.

Thank you!
Dear participants
and guests to this conference,

I WILL, FOR MY PART, touch on the Russian experience of interfaith dialogue between Christians, mostly Orthodox Christians, and Muslims and how all the world’s major religions and their adherents have been living together within the confines of the Russian State through the centuries.

Of course, we are all different, all of us in this room, and the same goes for the citizens of every single country. Generally speaking, every individual is unique and yet we are all united, among others, by means of religion, which is a strong unifying factor. Unfortunately, probably throughout human history, many tend to give into the temptation of resorting to force to solve, or try to solve, certain issues. Nevertheless, history and the sad experience of all those countries which have witnessed internal conflict have taught us that violence can only lead to misery, disaster, bankruptcy and bloodshed. Regrettably, even our homeland, Russia, could not escape such unfortunate instances. Still, let me focus on two positive examples.

You all know that in the 1990s and through the mid 2000s there was war in the Republic of Chechnya. It was a political juxtaposition which, at a certain point, turned into religious warfare. A portion of the representatives of Islam declared Gazavat. But when the decision was made and an agreement was reached between the chief mufti Akhmat-Haji Kadyrov, the new
President of Chechnya and Russian President Vladimir Putin, the first public building to be restored in Grozny was an Orthodox church, the Church of Archangel Michael, downtown.

Actually, when the reconciliation process began there was hardly any Christian population left. All Christians had either abandoned Chechnya or had been killed. Even as we speak, it is a predominantly Muslim country. Let me, nonetheless, point to the fact that it was the chief mufti of Chechnya, Akhmat-Haji Kadyrov, who took the decision. The reconciliation process helped modernise the country and ushered prosperity in. A week ago, I was in Grozny, a modern city in every sense of the word that I would urge you to visit to appreciate the fruits of reconciliation.

There has been, thank God, another positive experience where, again, no blood was shed. In the Republic of Tatarstan every decision about, for instance, building a new mosque, is always coupled with a decision to restore or build an Orthodox church. Whenever a medrese opens, there will definitely be a religious Orthodox Christian school opened, too. And all of that despite the fact that this is another predominantly Muslim Republic. I truly believe that every country can capitalise on such experiences.

But why am I referring to all that? Because we are talking about a majority which often tramples on its self-interest, controls its own urge to dominate and intentionally creates auspicious circumstances to facilitate other religions and denominations.

Russia is enforcing the practice of reconciliation, moreover, in its fight against the Islamic State in Syria. We are fighting terrorists not only with weapons but by establishing centres for reconciliation as well. Everyone is aware of it. Reconciliation centres help the most important thing materialise: peace is coming to the land of Syria along with the necessary preconditions to restore the country and help develop it further.

The fundamental thought I have been meaning to share with you is that the Russian experience, and the experience of every country where different religious communities, mostly Muslim and Christian, coexist proves that whenever strong public figures, such as Russian President Vladimir Putin, are heading the reconciliation process and promote dialogue, it works.

Nevertheless, peaceful dialogue is being conducted by ordinary people, the rank and file citizens who take the fortune of their homeland into their own hands and step forward to meet the other person halfway.
It is always the average person that plays a pivotal role, the individual who attends Sunday prayer at a Christian church or Friday prayer at the mosque and then meets with his neighbour, they embrace and share a meal together. Ordinary people shape history and shift it either towards progress and creativity or disaster.

How they do it is up to us. We put the right conditions in place, statespeople and parliaments adopt laws, but it is the ordinary citizens who make the choice between being destructive or creative.

Let us choose creativity over disaster.

Thank you for your attention!
Dear friends,

I AM A MEMBER OF THE SWEDISH PARLIAMENT, member of the Christian Democratic Party, member of the European Union Committee and member of the Nordic Council. The reason I am saying this is because I am very proud to be part of this family and to be member of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy.

We have gathered here today to discuss democracy and respect for human rights. Democracy is based on human dignity, where everyone is equal and human values are respected. Because each human is born free with equal rights and this is a condition, as it is stated in the UN declaration.

Christians, Muslims, Jews should respect and accept the freedom of religion or believe and even accept the right not to believe. A state, my friends, does not become democratic just by having an elected parliament and government. The constitutions must be based on the value of democracy and equality, where all citizens are equal. The parliaments should be elected by the people and the democratic rule of law with freedom of expression, freedom of opinion, freedom of religion, freedom of belief etc.

Religious and ethnic sectarianism, lack of tolerance of each other’s differences, lack of open societies, violence, persecution and discrimination are increasing in this region. In just the last few years a million citizens are suffering and a few hundred thousands are killed and injured. In the last centuries, we see more conflicts in this region and many differences between groups and governments with their ambitions to rule the country. This must end.
Only an open society with democracy, respect for human rights and cooperation can be a unifying factor offering a better future for future generations, a future of growth and increased prosperity for all.

Only when we all accept each other as equals, who deserve the common good, our society will be successful, free from conflicts, persecution, discrimination and persecution of minorities from their homelands. Pluralism of religion, culture ethnicity and languages create an inspiring mosaic, making a competitive, efficient and prosperous society.

Today, powerful religious and ethnic groups claim power, violating other peoples’ freedoms and human rights. This is not acceptable or humane and it is a very dangerous development, which will lead to killing brothers and sisters, preventing peace and freedom and democracy’s progress in this region.

Religious and ethnic sectarianism should be stopped. Many religious people, Christians, Muslims, and others, are suffering in this region, in Syria, in Yemen, in Iraq and the neighboring countries. It is time this killing stops. It is time to bring trust between peoples, to build a society on democratic values for there to be development for all.

I would like to share with you an important case for Christians in the region. The case of the two kidnapped archbishops; the Syrian Orthodox and the Orthodox Bishop of Alepo, in Syria; Gregorios Ibrahim and Boulos Yani-jy. These two very respected Christians, leaders and ambassadors of peace, were kidnapped on 22 April of 2013, while they were on humanitarian mission. They have been kidnapped for five years, against their will by some group in Syria.

I am addressing this case, because many of you are diplomats and representatives of parliaments of this region. My hope is that you will help to locate those kidnapped archbishops and they can be returned and united with their families and their churches. It is also important that all other kidnapped victims be immediately released and returned to their families.

We all have a shared responsibility as humans and responsibility to actively strive for democratic development and a better common future for all citizens, where everyone sees one another as an equal human being.

Friends,

We are people’s representatives and leaders. If we start constitutional reforms to make constitutions more democratic and just, the society will change. A simple example is to start reforming education, in order to include human
rights and equality and promotion of religious pluralism. Thus, democracy will then find its place in society and will flourish, leading to peace and the future will become brighter for future generations.

Let us take the European Union (EU) as an example. Following World War I and World War II, countries decided to start a financial cooperation, to enforce tolerance and accommodate trade. Today, we have 28 countries with 500 million citizens, who cooperate financially with open borders, without any religious, political or military conflicts. The EU has successfully reached development by securing the future of coming generations.

Let me give you another example. The cooperation between the Nordic countries. The Nordic Council, where I am an active member representing Sweden. Next year will be the anniversary of one hundred years of cooperation. Five neighboring countries with many things in common, with no borders, have a great cooperation in education, economy, trade, culture and languages. The Nordic Council always looks for the best interest of those who live in the Nordic countries. This cooperation ensures stability and peace in the region.

Let me say a few words about yesterday’s speeches. We listened to different speakers and religious leaders, and most of them talked about tolerance and respect for each other’s differences, justice and condemned violence, terrorism and so on. I appreciate this positive approach. I would appreciate it more if religious leaders from the Muslim world would inform the public and condemn persecution and killing Christians in Syria and Iraq. Through TV channels, mosques can convey the message to the people.

For we witnessed the genocide of the Christians in Iraq in 2014, where more than 150 thousands of Christians were forced to leave their country still remain refugees in northern Iraq, in the Kurdish region. It is important not to deny facts and face reality putting an end to killings and persecutions in Iraq and Syria.

Dear friends, colleagues,
I hope that one day in the near future the peoples in the Middle East will finally bring peace, freedom and democracy to everyone, accepting each other as equal fellow human beings, brothers and sisters.

Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to share my opinion with you.
Honourable participants,

ACCORDING TO A POPULAR BIAS the Middle East is inhabited by peoples whose ethnic origin is Arabic and who are Muslim by religion. Reality, of course, can be more complex since there are dozens of millions of Persians, Turks, Kurds etc. in the region. With a motley crew of people living in the area, the religious composition of the population is equally versatile, though Muslims are the majority beyond the shadow of a doubt.

Actually, out of the 400 million currently residing in the Middle East, 35-55 million belong to various Christian denominations and thus Christians are over 10% of the population in the Middle East.

Despite substantial variations from country to country, as far as Christianity in the Middle East nowadays is concerned, it is valid to claim that Christian communities, in general, are facing a plight due to the security situation deteriorating in this part of the world.

Over and above the unfavourable conditions affecting people in the region as a whole, the circumstances of the Christian communities are, moreover, being negatively impacted, and greatly so, by the emergence of political Islamism in its radical jihadist form, with jihadist groups filling the security deficit caused by a weak state capacity. All of the aforementioned favour mass migration and the ousting of Christian populations, which, over the years, has spiraled into full-fledged persecution in certain parts of the Middle East.
Speaking of religious denominations, the Middle East is home to a number of Christian churches and communities. The most numerous are the Old Oriental Churches, commonly known as monophysite Eastern Christian Churches. The Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, in Egypt, plays a leading role in the Middle Eastern Oriental Orthodox community. The presence of the Armenian Apostolic Church is also significant as there is an Armenian community, albeit small on occasion, in every single town or city in the Middle East. Last but not least, the Syriac Orthodox Church, next to its sizeable number of adherents in the Eastern Mediterranean, also has millions of faithful on the Indian subcontinent.

The Greek Orthodox are the second largest religious community in the Middle East. The majority belongs to one of the three Old Church Patriarchates – Jerusalem, Alexandria and Antioch. All three have a per excellence Greek character and most of the senior prelates are of Greek origin, although the congregation consists predominantly of Arabs.

Caught amidst the chaos of the long civil war in Syria, Christian communities found themselves in dire straits. Concentrated mostly in the big cities and in the NW part of the country, they were in a maelstrom already in the beginning of 2011. And despite its partly skeptical stance vis a vis the regime, the leadership of not only the jihadist groups but also the so-called “moderate opposition”, which was in the hands of Sunni extremists, had the Christians as well as most of the other minorities, ethnic and religious, submit themselves to the governing authority of Bashar al-Assad. Since tension de-escalated, after the Russian Federation engaged in the conflict, as of the fall of 2015, to help the formal administration in Damascus, the circumstances of the Christians have somewhat improved, especially bearing in mind how harsh their fate would have otherwise been had the official regime been overthrown, as that would have put them at the crosshairs of the revolted.

The situation of the Christians in Iraq has been particularly precarious in recent years, primarily because of their surrounding circumstances. Most Christian settlements in the north of the country found themselves in the frontline, caught between the so-called Islamic State, the Iraqi army, the Kurds, other communities and foreign invaders. Against this backdrop, the Christians were forced to massively evacuate the area they had been living in for centuries, their number dropping abruptly
from over a million and a half (prior to the 2003 US occupation) to maybe one third.

Then again, one may add that Christians in Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Israel are better off despite the fact that in all of the aforementioned there is also a noticeable demographic decay. In Lebanon, the Maronites, the Orthodox and the Greek-Catholic are guaranteed senior public sector jobs whereas in Jordan a small percentage of Christians, first and foremost Roman Catholic, control a sizeable part of the financial flows. Christianity in Palestine is traditionally an important component of the Arab-Christian identity but the total number of Christians, compared to the rest of the population, is shrinking considerably due to migration.

This is why we need to keep encouraging interfaith dialogue and cultural diversity in the Middle East as the sine qua non elements of peaceful and harmonious coexistence between all the peoples, based on their differences, with tolerance and respect, which, no doubt, this Conference will help pursue.
Honorable Speaker
of the Lebanese Parliament,
Your Graces, Honorable participants,

LET ME GREET THIS CONFERENCE on behalf of the Parliament of Albania and let me start my speech by thanking our Lebanese hosts, the Parliament of this country, for their hospitality.

It is very sad that we gather here to discuss peaceful coexistence, mutual respect and constructive collaboration between religious communities, between Christians and Muslims, while wanton war, mass murder and destruction waged on behalf of a hijacked religion have caused immense suffering among the people of Iraq, Syria, and generally in the Levant and wider the Middle East.

However I am glad that we convene in a peaceful country that despite the region’s difficult past stands out as an electoral democracy with thriving confessional communities able to make compromises needed to keep the state standing.

It is heartening to see this and incumbent upon us to cordially wish you well especially in the background of what has been going on from Suez to the Tigris River. Unspeakable atrocities occurred in the last decade against the historical Christian communities, their lives, churches, properties. This very unfortunately caused a demographic hemorrhage in an area where Christianity saw its first daylight. Muslims and other groups were targeted as well. While violent religious extremism was present before the spread of Daesh and its horrible consequences left many aloof.
This should make everybody involved think about why certain people are successful in misusing religion for their political ends, despicable as these might be. True, the sectarian conflicts, as also Europe’s history shows, are the bloodiest of all. But the understanding of religion and its tenets for action is a primary responsibility of the theologians and clergymen, the ulemas. What was written twelve or twenty centuries ago and constitutes the Holy Scripture must be respected. It must also be explained in the proper context putting emphasis on ethical principles like love, compassion, rejection of violence and respect for the other. We heard that clearly this morning and this was very good. But, there should be also less hate preachers in mosques, madrassas, in the streets and online. So that the pool of those who thrive in hatred becomes smaller and hopefully dries out.

We dedicated this conference to parliamentary dialogue on religious issues as it elected legislatures are the right place not only to pass laws that guarantee religious and minority rights but also watch that they are observed and enforced. They are also a venue of communication that can help foster understanding and cooperation among religious communities and their churches.

My country, Albania, is a bit like Lebanon: we have various religious communities the Orthodox, the Shia Bektashi, the Catholics and the Sunni, but the people’s identity is primarily ethnic, not religious. So all parliamentary parties, be they Conservative or Socialist, have members from all confessions. As the Head of the World Bektashi Order, Haxhi Dede Edmond Brahimaj here with us might testify for the relationship among religious communities at home is not just marked tolerance but also by mutual respect and constructive engagement.

Unfortunately, in the last years, we had a number of radicalized youth that falling prey to the hate ideology went to join the Daesh ranks. Well, we had to put many culprits in jail and also take other soft measures. We are happy to see this problem subsiding. As Albania strives to join the European Union my hope is that precisely here the EU, with its soft power and good intentions, in an area where some foreign state powers are sometimes viewed with suspicion, can do more to help the Levant and the Middle East overcome the current difficulties and become again the thriving area it once was.

Thank you for your attention.
Ladies and gentlemen,

May God’s Peace, Mercy and Blessings be upon you.

IT IS A GREAT PLEASURE for me to be with you, here, in Lebanon. My thanks go to the I.A.O. for taking this initiative, in cooperation with the Lebanese National Assembly providing us all with this great opportunity and the warm and generous hospitality.

The common discourse shared by the followers of the divinely inspired monotheistic religions is a foundation for diversity in our unity. Since our God is One, the basis of our values and our creation is one. So, we need to work together to build our future together. Yet, extremism, fanaticism and terror are the dangers we are all faced with. If we look into the Sacred Texts of all heavenly religions, nowhere shall we find any basis for extremism, fanaticism and terrorism. There seems to be a problem, which may be due to either the individual, who finds fault with faith or religion and is unable to find stability in his identity, or the group the individual belongs to. Then, maybe this is a person living in an environment of disrespect for human dignity where there is injustice and, thus, respect for human rights and decency could falter. It is easy, given such an ambiance, to turn to extremism, fanaticism and ter-
ror. As a result, we, politicians, and parliamentarians, must act promptly using political speech. Everything starts with the word. If it is good, then a good deed follows. And should it be foul, a foul deed shall follow.

The problem with politicians is that for vote-mongering reasons, sometimes we tend to take on others and attack them to make ourselves look good in the eyes of the voters. That can become a breeding ground for extremist tendencies among our followers. And since we are all the children of one Maker, we, the adherents of divinely-inspired monotheistic religions, are also being faced with more serious risks that can get even bigger, with moral and human demise affecting human culture and civilisation, especially in the so-called developed world. We are all in this together. The moral and human foundation is the same for all heavenly religions. If we, therefore, look at things this way, tackling all those challenges will be easier.

About the issue of the Holy City of Jerusalem, what we have been up against recently, the latest U.S. decision, does not mean victory for anyone, be it Israel or America or anyone else for that matter. What is happening, as far as Jerusalem is concerned, is a defeat for us all, the United States, Jews, Muslims and Christians alike. Jerusalem is not an average city, nor is it a mere piece of land. It is the capital of god-inspired monotheistic religions. We need to look at it through such a lens if we really wish to get on the right track.

We, in the Balkans, in the Republic of Serbia, as you know, got a taste of warfare and bloodshed in recent years. Still, we think that the path to and the policy for reconciliation is the only way. We, the Serbian Parliament, politically speaking, try to advance reconciliation in everything we do. If we fail to turn over a new leaf and we go on with another hundred years of conflict and war, no good will come of it.

Thank you. Peace be upon you.
Mr. Speaker, Mr. President, dear participants, ladies and gentlemen,

WE ARE HERE TO FACILITATE reconciliation and cooperation between and among religions for the benefit of humankind. There have been similar efforts over the past and here is one major example.

In 1993, the so-called “Parliament of the World’s Religions” held a conference in Chicago that led up to the “Declaration towards a World Ethic”. The Global Ethic Foundation, based in Tubingen, Germany, had originally come up with a framework for the Declaration, based on the following fundamental universal precepts, principles and directives:

- The principles of humanity and golden rule.
- Non-violence and respect for life.
- Justice and truthfulness.
- Equal rights and partnership.

Seventeen years later, on October 6, 2009, the United Nations produced its own Manifesto for a Global Economic Ethic using the aforementioned Declaration, apparently against the backdrop of the economic crisis and more, as a basis in the wider context of UN’s Global Compact. Not wishing to tire you, I shall refrain from reading out the entire list of the initial sig-
natories to that Manifesto, which I have attached as an annex to my written speech. It is, nonetheless, worth mentioning that one of them was the CEO of the Novartis Foundation!

But what has been the outcome of all these years of exercising policies, by virtue of the United Nations and the Parliament of the World’s Religions, based on the Manifesto for a Global Economic Ethic?

Wealth is being produced and distributed in an ever-more unfair manner, racism is rampant, famine is claiming the lives of millions of children and adults and as for wars, in our part of the world, in particular, they are still going strong, their death toll being tremendous, with people suffering from hunger and hundreds of thousands being uprooted, forced to leave their homeland and living in dire conditions in camps abroad.

By now we are all in danger, all the more so because of the ever-increasing threat of climate change. As to interfaith relations in our part of the world, they have deteriorated because relations between the peoples of the region have been poisoned by war and conflicts of all sorts and unbelievably heinous crimes we watch unfold continuously on our TV sets on a daily basis.

And if the forecasts of economist Thomas Piketty about our living conditions turn out to be right, and we end up retrograding and relapsing into 19th or, what is worse, 18th century conditions, then woe betide us.

A question begs itself:
What’s wrong?

First, to answer this question we need to look into which centres of power, the world over, are to blame for this slippery downhill trajectory. You could retort we already know who is who and I, for my part, can safely guess right away which centres you have in mind.

In the forefront, there are some big multinational corporations, which will stop at nothing and would not hesitate to step over dead bodies as long as their hyperprofits are intact as originally planned. They lack vision on society and think only of profit. These corporations are the initiator and instigator of international crimes, although some state leaders are not lacking in that skill either.

But, for power centres to legitimise all those criminal activities of theirs they need to collaborate with governments, which in some parts of the world can be easily bought out for a fee. In some other places, though, it
can get a bit more complicated with elected governments operating dem-
ocratically there. In the latter, timelessly, power goes back and forth, from
the hands of the Democrats over to the Republicans, from the Tories to
the Labour Party, from Christian-Democrats to Social Democrats and so
on. And yet, in spite of the democratic process, their activities boil down to
what I described before: they are devastating for humankind.

All democratic governments, sometimes with the blessings of religious
leaders, essentially serve the capitalist way. As a result, there is war and,
certainly, exploitation to guarantee huge profits for multinational corpo-
rations and their owners, leaving the rest of the people, to say the least, in
poverty and misery.

Of course, there is also the Marxist way of production which, wherev-
er applied, always started with tenets in favour of the poor and ended in
poverty for all, except for the few, the former leaders of the system, who
rob people of their wealth and, slowly, by donning the mask of a dem-
ocratic proponent, get to the highest ranks of their allegedly “democratic”
but essentially oligarchic regimes.

And now a second question begs itself: is it possible for the aforemen-
tioned crimes to be the product of democratic regimes?

What we know, based on their Constitutions, is that in all of these re-
publics reference is made to the various universal principles which were
typical of the ancient Athenian Republic but systematically fail to be com-
plied with today. So, they end up as mere declarations on paper, or they
may be enforced in a very incomplete manner, quite unlike Athens in
antiquity where declarations were practically meaningful, as was to be ex-
pected and as becomes every truly democratic regime.

My conclusion, and luckily, today, the conclusion of many others, is
that the cornerstone guaranteeing the implementation of the declarations
of the Athenian Republic, which was free of all forms of conniving, cor-
ruption and vested interests, has been replaced, in contemporary democ-
racies, by the institution of electing contemporary archons and citizens
to the Boule (Parliament) and the appointment of the chief magistrates
by the political leadership, a process that Aristotle, in his work Athenaion
Politeia (Constitution of Athens), claimed was typical of authoritarian re-
gimes, not democratic ones. Basically, the electoral process in democracies
today works in a way that allows the network of lobbying by vested inter-
ests on all sides to come closer together and to consummate their relations. This practically contravenes the principle of Parliament checking up on the work of Government and allows perpetrators to go unpunished.

This “modernisation” of democracy is, to a certain extent, what breeds war, poverty, inequality, racism and fanaticism which is sadly true in all religions!

As for democracy today, next to the fact that there is no independent Judiciary, the Parliament has also been turned into the seal of the Executive. And so, all these nice ideas in the draft declaration about respecting different views, citizen choices and so on, will be bumping into the obstacles that the very repulsive “products” of modern-day democracies create. As long as they are around, we will be seeing excesses and atrocities committed by groups of fanatics which breed and are rampant in such contexts, be they regimes or communities, and in every religion, of course.

Nowadays, we are basically dealing with societies of unbearable barbarity that are mostly the result of modern democratic governments. There is barbarity in other kinds of regimes, too, and some are definitely a reaction to the actions of so-called democracies. At any rate, we ought to acknowledge there is a serious problem in the function of democratic governance today.

The ancient Athenian Republic had pointed to human nature as the reason why democracy malfunctioned and established sortition, which was election by lot, as a means to appoint archons, deputies and magistrates. It subsequently limited the use of the electoral process to a handful of very specific cases, such as the appointment of the ten generals who were in charge of defense or the really rare appointment of a highly-specialised public servant. And such voting procedures were held at the Pnyx, where the Ecclesia of Demos met. Men over the age of twenty got to vote, and so did all of the Archons and Parliamentarians (Vouleftai). That was their way to contain, to a significant degree, all types of corruption and vested interests on all sides.

In today’s democracies, instead of sortition there is the electoral process, an institution the results of which, so far, make it a highly unsuccessful means for Democracy to function, especially given the current state of the mass media, which are in the hands of big economic interests. I believe
that the circumstances are mature to now look for new ways to get citizens appointed as parliamentarians to eliminate corruption. And our quest for new institutions must start with the modernisation of political parties, which must be large-scale and immediate:

(a) Let us replace the electoral process with sortition, which was used successfully in the days of the Athenian Republic, to appoint people to partisan institutions. For the time being, the head of the party shall continue to be appointed by party members and friends.

(b) Let us grant political parties, which subscribe to all democratic postulates, full access to all printed and electronic media aimed at informing the citizens on state expenses. As far as Greece is concerned, some pertinent proposals may be found in my book titled “In Search of a Democratic Role Model for Today”, Kaktos Publishing. In other countries, such issues must be tackled by competent local paragons. What we are looking for is for the republic to work, which means that democratic postulates ought to be put in practice so that political parties need not resort to the use of religious adjectives to hold on to their voters. Preaching the word in every religion is the mission of its respective representatives on Earth, the sole purpose of which is to save the souls of followers whilst what citizens do is the doing of democracy, i.e. the political parties.

Should these first steps towards modernising democracy go forward, then all other necessary institutional changes will emerge as self-evident.

Improving the function of democracy will strengthen the efforts of parliaments but also the efforts of various religious leaders with a view to a rapprochement so that more appropriate frameworks for cooperation may be found, because a more smooth democratic function increases mutual respect. Besides, this is one of the most important projects for democracy and it could minimise fanaticism, which is currently a major obstacle to efforts like this one, here, today. There are no infidels in the world. All citizens believe in something and this something must be respected by all, as long as it does not obstruct others from begging to differ and from believing in something different.

It will take a considerable amount of work and effort to overcome the
big trauma of wars in our region where leaders rise to power by taking advantage of religious emotion, even rallying archpriests on their side to try to fanaticise their faithful followers.

The mission of us all is difficult! I, nonetheless, believe we must undertake this struggle, albeit with the scarce tools today’s democratic regimes equip us with, as long as we pursue objectives aimed at a gradual increase of our equipment to radically overhaul those regimes which are democratic in name only and to help turn them into real democracies. Only then will our societies be able to peacefully coexist and be creative for the common good. Change must start with contemporary political parties operating, as per their declarations, in the name of Democracy. If political parties really mean it, then, as the saying goes: “Behold Rhodes,....!”
Honourable participants,

PARLIAMENTARY DIPLOMACY as “Track 1½ Diplomacy”: the role of parliamentarians in conflict resolution and peacebuilding

Introduction
The theme of the conference can be approached from a number of viewpoints. From a broader and theoretical perspective, the subject of the conference can be subsumed to the more general issues of intercultural dialogue and the peaceful accommodation of (ethnic, religious, etc) difference, on the one hand, and of the role of parliamentarians in such processes, on the other hand. I have chosen to approach the theme of the conference along these theoretical lines. The title of my presentation is: “Parliamentary Diplomacy as “Track 1½ Diplomacy”: the role of parliamentarians in conflict resolution and peace-building”.

I will first refer to the concept of “parliamentary diplomacy” and to the lesser known concept of “track 1½ diplomacy” (or “track one and a half diplomacy”); in a nutshell, this second term is employed in the scientific fields of Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution and refers to peace-building and negotiation initiatives that occupy the intermediate zone between official (“track 1”) and unofficial (“track 2”) diplomacy. As implied in the title of my presentation, I argue that the engagement of parliaments and parliamentarians in such conflict resolution processes is an example, indeed a neglected one, of track 1½ diplomacy. I elaborate

Dr. Thomas Goumenos
Political Science, Panteion University of Athens
on this role that parliamentarians play, or should more often and consistently play, in the final part of my presentation.

Parliamentary diplomacy

**Definition and forms of parliamentary diplomacy:** “Parliamentary diplomacy” has been defined in various ways. One valid working definition is offered by Weiglas and de Boer (2007, pp.93-4):

> the full range of international activities undertaken by a parliamentarian in order to increase mutual understanding between countries, to assist each other in improving the control of governments and the representation of a people and to increase the democratic legitimacy of inter-governmental institutions.

Various activities have been subsumed under “parliamentary diplomacy”. It may include the ways through which national parliaments are engaged in international affairs (IPU 2005, pp.4-7; Beetham 2006: 157, 168-72). It certainly includes bilateral relations (e.g. “friendship groups”, regular visits, exchange of delegations) between parliaments (IPU 2005, pp.25-6; Stavridis 2006, pp.5-6; Malamud & Stavridis 2011, p.104), as well as relations between national parliaments and inter-parliamentary organisations (IPU 2005, p.29-31).

However, it seems that multilateral activities and settings are at the core of the concept of “parliamentary diplomacy”. Parliamentary diplomacy is more institutionalized than “simple” parliamentary cooperation (Stavridis 2006, p.5). The institutional framework within which multilateral parliamentary diplomacy is mostly exercised are the various “International Parliamentary Institutions” (IPIs) (Šabić 2008a; Cofelice 2012).

A basic classification of IPIs distinguishes between “international parliamentary organs’ (IPOs)”, i.e. “organs of international governmental organisations composed of parliamentarians” and “international parliamentary associations (IPAs)”, which are not attached to an international organisation (Šabić 2008, p.258). “Transnational networks of parliamentarians” (Cofelice 2012, p.12), which are “voluntary associations of national parliamentarians” (Cutler 2006, p.80) can be considered as a major subcategory of IPAs¹.

¹ Cutler (2006) and Cofelice (2012) classify networks of parliamentarians as a separate
Based on the above, the actors of parliamentary diplomacy are national parliaments, parliamentarians, political parties, local parliaments, regional and international parliaments (Fiott 2011, pp.1-2).

International activities that have at their core some form of deliberation, cooperation and coordination among parliamentary actors have steadily increased during the last decades (Šabić 2008a, pp.259-61; Cofelice 2012, p.5).

Limitations and weaknesses: An obvious and basic weakness of parliamentary diplomacy in relation to traditional, state diplomacy is its limited political power and decision-making responsibilities. This structural weakness is directly related to the continued primacy of (national) states in international politics as the legitimate representatives of peoples and carriers of sovereign power.

Moreover, conflicting national or ideological interests among members of IPIs inevitably restrict their capacity to intervene in global affairs. Parliamentary actors lack ordinary access to a number of resources available to governments, such as finances, intelligence or expert knowledge. (Beetham 2006, p.176; Stavridis 2006, p.11-12; Weiglas & de Boer 2007, p.97; Šabić 2008a, pp.266-7; Fiott 2011, p.4; Malamud & Stavridis 2011, p.102).

Track 1½ Diplomacy

There are differing views on terminology and classification, however one could simplify the picture as follows. Conflict resolution is the overlying term that includes a number of processes. Three broad resolution processes can be identified: 1) conflict prevention, 2) conflict management and conflict settlement, which aim at the containment and the negotiated terms of conflict and 3) peacebuilding and conflict transformation, which aim at reconciliation, reconstruction and the tackling of the root causes of conflict (Sandole 1998; Ramsbotham et al. 2005; Paffenholz 2009, pp.3-5).

Conflicts resolution refers primarily to violent conflict, i.e. interstate category. Examples of transnational networks of parliamentarians include Parliamentarians for Global Action, the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons and the Global Organization of Parliamentarians against Corruption (Cofelice 2012, p. 27).
wars, but primarily ethnic conflicts and civil wars. However, it also applies to non-violent conflicts or crises.

Peaceful methods of conflict resolution include more formal processes such as negotiations and peace talks, mediation, good offices and facilitation, conciliation, fact-finding missions, preventive diplomacy and early-warning measures to more informal practices, such as “problem-solving” workshops, confidence-building, consensus-building; truth and reconciliation commissions, restorative justice practices, informal meetings, dialogue process, unofficial contacts, etc (Allen Nan 2003; Ramsbotham et al. 2005; Allen Nan et al. 2009, pp.68; Jeong 2010, pp.13-15, 214-22; Mikulaschek & Romita 2011, pp.2-10; Ηρακλείδης 2011, pp.89-91, 96-112)2. Most of these methods are conducive to, or even require, the involvement of third parties.

A popular classification of means and actors of peaceful conflict resolution is between “track 1” (or “first-track”) and “track 2” (or “second-track”) diplomacy. In a nutshell, track 1 diplomacy refers to formal methods of conflict resolution that involve official actors, such as diplomats, ministers, heads of states and representatives of international organisations. Track 2 diplomacy refers to more informal methods, which include unofficial actors, such as members of adversarial groups, members of civil society, religious leaders, NGOs, etc. Thus, track 1 diplomacy has a structured and formal character, it operates at a higher political level and is indispensable for the conclusion of a political agreement. Track 2 diplomacy, also called “citizen’s diplomacy”, is complementary and supportive to track 1, it involves interactive processes of peacebuilding among individuals and groups with limited formal political power with the goal to promote coexistence, trust and reconciliation at the societal level (Chigas 2003; Ramsbotham et al. 2005; Allen Nan et al. 2009, pp.65-6; Jeong 2010, pp.207-9; Jones 2008, pp.1-2).

Within this literature, more diplomacy tracks have been proposed; the concept of “multi-track” diplomacy has emerged, which essentially

---

2. This (non-exhaustive, but representative) list refers to political or diplomatic methods; legal methods also exist, the most important being judicial settlement and arbitration via recourse to an international court.
denotes that conflict resolution and peacebuilding is - or should be – a multilevel process (Schiff 2010, p.95). One of the multiple diplomacy tracks that have been proposed is track 1½ diplomacy, on which we focus.

“Track 1½”, as implied in the very term and mentioned above, refers to those conflict resolution activities that lie between official and unofficial diplomacy. In an influential definition of track 1½ diplomacy, this intermediate and hybrid character has been specified as “unofficial intervenors working with official representatives of the conflict parties” (Allen Nan et al. 2009, p.66). This understanding of track 1½ diplomacy as “public or private interactions between official representatives of conflicting” political entities mediated by a third, non-official party (Mapendere 2005, p.69) seems to be prevalent. This understanding portrays track 1½ as a bridge between official and unofficial activities (Allen Nan et al. 2009, p.66), i.e. as a space where track 1 and 2 meet, communicate and cooperate.

The range of actors involved in track 1½ diplomacy practices is broad and spans groups of “officials” and “unofficials”. Representatives of the conflict parties usually belong to the higher level: top decision-makers, government officials, opposition leaders, representatives of political movements (Mapendere 2005; Allen Nan et al. 2009, p.73). Participant actors, moreover, might not be officials themselves, but explicitly authorised by officials. Moreover, track 1½ diplomacy often involves mixed actors, i.e. talks between officials and non-officials (Lieberfeld 2007, p.1543-5).

Mediators or third parties consist of a rather broader group of actors, although only rarely political leaders or international organisations. However, former high-ranking politicians (e.g. Jimmy Carter, Marti Ahtisaari) or diplomats have served as mediators. A defining feature of track 1½ mediators, though, is that they usually are non-officials, with certain connections to official actors, who are trustworthy and influential, but do not have (considerable) political power. Their role is mostly facilitative. Examples of mediators include research institutes, foundations, academics, NGOs, foreign government emissaries (lacking an official position) (Mapendere 2005, p.71; Heiling 2008, p.182; Allen Nan et al. 2009; Schiff 2010, p.96)
Activities: Conflict resolution methods, practices and processes used in track 1½ are rather closer to the ones of unofficial diplomacy (track 2): capacity building, training in negotiation skills, roundtable facilitation, dialogue, etc (Boergers 1998, p.26; Allen Nan et al. 2009, pp.74-7). Semiofficial talks as a preparatory or first step towards formal negotiations have also been categorised as track 1½ diplomacy (Lieberfeld 2007, p.1543; Schiff 2010, p.102).

Thus, track 1½ diplomacy seems to have certain appealing features in relation to tracks 1 and 2. First, it involves more flexible, informal and interactive methods than official diplomacy. Moreover, participants usually have authority and resources, which implies that they have more power to influence (immediate) political change than non-official actors (Boergers 1998, p.26; Allen Nan 2003; Mapendere 2005; pp.72-3; Lieberfeld 2007, p.1543). In other words, track 1½ diplomacy resembles track 2 in terms of methods and mediators, whereas it is closer to track 1 in terms of representatives and ultimate objectives (Mapendere 2005, p.70).

Parliamentary diplomacy as track 1½ diplomacy: (possible) contributions to conflict resolution

Parliamentary diplomacy and parliamentarians are rarely examined in accounts of track 1½ diplomacy. However, parliamentarians have been involved, both as representatives of one of the adversarial groups (Boergers 1998; Schiff 2010, p.101) and as mediators (Rafi 2005, p.72), although this role seems better suited for interparliamentary organisations.

In this final section, first I argue that parliamentary diplomacy can be considered as a case of track 1½ diplomacy and then briefly present actual and possible ways that parliamentary diplomacy and parliamentarians contribute to conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

In a general sense, parliamentary diplomacy is closely related to the promotion of peace. This presentation briefly examines the role of parliamentary actors in peace-building activities in the more concrete sense, i.e. in the resolution of particular conflicts between or within states.

Conflict prevention and resolution are seen by many as an activity that parliamentary diplomacy can play a meaningful and constructive role (Malamud & Stavridis 2011, p.105). If one accepts that parliamentary diplomacy
“represents an important middle ground” between traditional (i.e. track 1) and non-official (i.e. track 2) diplomacy (Cutler 2006, pp.82-3), then parliamentary diplomacy is a sub-category of track 1½ diplomacy (PGA 2001, p.5; Rafi 2005, p.72). Parliamentarians can be considered as valuable actors of track 1½ diplomacy, as they can operate in the middle ground between governments, on the one hand, and citizens, grassroot organisations and NGOs, on the other hand (Weiglas & de Boer 2007, p.96).

Parliamentarians, parliaments and interparliamentary institutions have particular advantages vis-à-vis actors that refer to the two other tracks. In differentiation to diplomats and top officials, proposals on behalf of parliamentary actors do not strictly bind governments; thus, they can employ a number of alternative means and touch a wide range of issues (Malamud & Stavridis 2011, p.104). The above entails a level of flexibility (Beetham 2006, p.173) for parliamentarians, a quality that renders them ideal mediators and proponents of innovative solutions. Moreover, in differentiation to non-official actors, parliamentarians have regular links with official actors and possess a degree of political legitimacy, since they are representatives of a people (PGA 2001, p.6; Weiglas & de Boer 2007, p.96; Šabić 2008a. p.267).

What parliamentary actors do or can do? We can distinguish between the role of mediator and the role of representative in a conflict resolution process.

With regards to conflict mediation:

- International parliamentary institutions have taken various peace-making initiatives, such as visiting and conducting talks with officials, organising negotiations between adversaries, monitoring the implementation of peace accords etc. Such initiatives on behalf of the Parliamentarians for Global Action network constitute a good example (PGA 2001; Rafi 2005, p.74).
- Parliamentarians from third countries may participate in information-gathering and other conflict prevention missions in conflict regions (PGA 2001; IDEA & IPU 2005).
- Regional parliamentary institutions have participated in fact-finding missions, promoted inter-parliamentary dialogue etc. The African AMANI Forum that has been particularly active in the countries
of the Great Lakes region is well-known example of such activities (IDEA & IPU 2005, pp.70-72; UNDP 2006; AMANI web archive).

- Parliamentarians, and especially Speakers of parliaments, have contributed to the adoption of confidence-building measures.
- Parliamentary actors on many occasions support the human and political rights of ethnic or religious groups and minorities in third countries (UNDP 2006, p.8), a practice though that can be perceived as an illegitimate intervention.
- Parliamentary actors have organised and participated in international meetings that examined particular conflicts and ways for their resolution (IPU 2005, pp.8, 27-8).
- Parliamentary actors participate in electoral monitoring missions; this can enhance the legitimacy of the electoral process and prevent relapse to violence (IPU 2005, p.28; Malamud & Stavridis 2011, p.105).
- National parliaments and IPIs provide assistance for the development of parliamentary institutions in countries emerging from conflict (IPU 2005, p.28; Weiglas & de Boer 2007, p.96; Malamud & Stavridis 2011, p.105)\(^3\). However, such parliamentary assistance should avoid being the instrument of paternalistic or neocolonial state policies, as has happened on certain occasions.
- In certain cases parliamentarians have contributed to conflict resolution within their country, (e.g. in Indonesia) by acting as mediators between the central government and rebel groups (IPU 2005, p.28).

**Parliamentarians as representatives** of one of the parties:

- In cases of strained relations between states (e.g. US-Cuba, UK-Argentina, Pakistan-India), parliamentarians from one country have paid visits to the other, and thus have served as forerunners in the reconciliation process.
- Similarly, in cases of complete lack of official contacts, parliamentarians from two countries have met within the framework of international parliamentary institutions, something that has contributed to the easing of interstate tension. (IPU 2005, pp.8, 27-8; Stavridis 2006, pp.13-4, 18; Malamud & Stavridis 2011, p.104).

\(^3\) On the broader issue of technical parliamentary assistance see Beetham 2006, pp.176-9.
• The role of parliamentarians in countries that experience transition from war to peace or face the prospect of ethnic conflict is highly important for conflict prevention, conflict management and post-conflict peacebuilding. Parliamentarians in such settings often contribute to the legislation of power-sharing institutions, the parliamentary representation of minorities, the creation of truth and reconciliation committees, the promotion of democratic reforms, the oversight of the security sector, etc (IDEA & IPU 2005; O’Brien 2005, pp.5-14; UNDP 2006, pp.4-6; Dutta et al. 2009, pp.4-9)

• Similarly, in conflict-afflicted countries parliamentarians directly participate in conflict resolution initiatives with both official and unofficial actors (e.g. in Ukraine) (ICPS 2015, p.40).

• Finally, parliamentarians from conflict-afflicted countries can join international or regional parliamentary assemblies or participate in the formation of new parliamentary networks.

Conclusion
Parliamentary actors can contribute through various constructive ways in conflict resolution. Their role can be important in itself, but is more valuable when it complements, in the capacity of mediator and facilitator, the interactions among top officials and leaders. Parliamentary diplomacy can be conceived as a form of track 1½ diplomacy, as it is in an advantageous position to combine and bridge methods and mentalities of both official and unofficial diplomacy.

As implied above, parliamentary diplomacy, in order to be effective in conflict resolution must at any cost avoid being perceived as a mouthpiece of state or other self-serving interests or as an instance of illegitimate involvement in national affairs. Moreover, certain parliamentary initiatives in the peace-building field remain incomplete (e.g. The Parliamentarians Network for Conflict Prevention and Human Security) or particularly successful efforts (such as the AMANI Forum) are proven short-lived; thus, better organised interparliamentary initiatives are needed, with a special focus on issues and cases of conflict resolution, peace-building and intercultural dialogue.
Honourable participants,

Parliamentarianism and the new world

THE AIM OF THIS CONFERENCE is to underscore that interparliamentary practices and the parliamentary arena can and should proceed with initiatives to foster mutual understanding between Christians and Muslims based on the principles of freedom.

At this juncture, it is clear that to achieve peaceful coexistence between peoples of different cultural backgrounds it is imperative we all rally together and parliaments must pitch in. After all, the St. Petersburg Declaration on promoting cultural pluralism and peace through interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogue, a great IPU document, clearly states that “As parliamentarians, we commit to working towards cultural pluralism and peace through interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogue.”

But there is also a clear need for stronger independent parliamentary discourse since modern parliaments have slipped into a unilateral parliamentary environment that defends or criticises government work and rare are the occasions when initiatives transcending partisan or local interests are undertaken to manage collective interests.

Empowering parliamentary discourse can, therefore, I believe, play a decisive role in fostering mutual understanding between Christians and Muslims. Burden-free parliamentary discourse promotes and confirms the fundamental values and principles of democracy: dialogue, proper argumentation, rationalism, commitment to working for and prioritising public good. Parliamentary discourse strengthens the work of parliamentarianism, which
The presence, here, today, of so many interparliamentary institutions affords us all scope to reflect and to have a responsible debate on the way in which your delegates will be meeting in the near future to discuss this very issue and its prospects, i.e. how parliamentary discourse and practices may facilitate an understanding between Muslims and Christians. In other words, they will be coming up with ways and methods as to how texts and documents, like the aforementioned IPU declaration and others, can possibly influence and empower modern parliamentary discourse on the core issue of coexistence and unity in diversity. On June 4-5, something along these lines is bound to happen as a result of a Russian Duma initiative whereupon the principles for uninterrupted interaction between MPs, regardless of political circumstances, will be discussed in conjunction with scope to develop parliamentary institutions. The I.A.O. could play a pivotal role by calling a first meeting of all interparliamentary entities that are keen on the subject, to begin with.

Honourable MPs, ladies and gentlemen,
all of us here, today, the children of the blessed Mediterranean Sea, a sea that has changed, time and again, the course of the world by means of its civilisation, and you, the true representatives of the peoples gathered here, in wonderful Beirut, I would venture to guess that every time you think about the future of the world, each time you lend an ear to the whisper or the cries of the people, your thoughts turn to the youth and the future we are building for them for it is theirs.

Let us suppose that the average age of statespersons who are currently ruling the world, one way or another, or express the will of the people, is 60. Supposing they were children in the 1950s or the 60s, then we must agree times have changed. Our era is unique and unprecedented in the history of humankind owing to the advent of new technologies. Should a statesperson
fail to consider that in every single instance of their life, then they would lose focus and get a view of the future of the world through distortion lenses. We tend to look back unto the past to find examples and draw lessons from experience. I do not know how useful looking into the past may be these days with all the changes new technologies are ushering in. My point is that as long as we take stock of history and realise wars have happened to control resources, e.g. to get hold of mines, oil, natural gas, transport pathways, and notice that what has happened before is happening over and over again, and there have been centuries of warfare and hetatombs of casualties and religions were involved, can we really count on this to be a valid and safe example to avoid a future repeat of past occurrences that caused such bloodshed?

    Let me take an example to drive my point home. They say wars in the region are mostly fought over oil. Many get themselves killed over oil reserves while a few, in the neighbouring emirates, are living off of it in conditions of utter and absurd luxury. Dieter Zetsche, President of the BoD of Daimler AG, the company that makes Mercedes cars, explained that much in an interview:

    "...Last year, more solar energy was installed worldwide than fossil. Energy companies are desperately trying to limit access to the grid to prevent competition from home solar installations, but that cannot last. Technology will take care of that strategy. Electric cars will become mainstream about 2020. Cities will be less noisy because all new cars will run on electricity. Electricity will become incredibly cheap and clean: solar production has been on an exponential curve for 30 years, but you can now see the burgeoning impact.

    Autonomous cars: In 2018, the first self-driving cars will appear for the public. Around 2020, the complete industry will start to be disrupted. You don’t want to own a car anymore. You will call a car with your phone; it will show up at your location and drive you to your destination. You will not need to park it, you only pay for the driven distance and can be productive while driving. Our kids will never get a driver’s license and will never own a car.

    1.2 million people die each year in car accidents worldwide. We now have one accident every 100,000 km, with autonomous driving that will drop to one accident in 10 million km. That will save a million lives each year.

    Many engineers from Volkswagen and Audi; are completely terrified of Tesla.

    Insurance companies will have massive trouble because, without accidents, the insurance will become 100x cheaper. Their car insurance business model will disappear.
Education: The cheapest smartphones are already at $10 in Africa and Asia. By 2020, 70% of all humans will own a smartphone. That means, everyone has the same access to world-class education.

Every child can use Khan Academy for everything a child needs to learn at school in First World countries.

There have already been releases of software in Indonesia and soon there will be releases in Arabic, Swahili, and Chinese this summer. I can see enormous potential if we give the English app for free. Children in Africa and everywhere else can become fluent in English and that could happen within half a year.

Longevity: Right now, the average lifespan increases by 3 months per year. Four years ago, the life span used to be 79 years, now it’s 80 years. The increase itself is increasing and by 2036, there will be more than one year increase per year. So we all might live for a long long time, probably way more than 100.

Mood: There is an app called “moodies” which can already tell in which mood you’re in. By 2020 there will be apps that can tell by your facial expressions if you are lying. Imagine a political debate where it’s being displayed when they’re telling the truth and when they’re not…”

All these wonderful things are happening thanks to new technologies and the liberal economy. In this entire process, I see no mechanisms to express, project and defend social interests. It is apparently up to statespeople and parliamentarians to protect our cultural diversity so that the world goes not into a phase of cultural monochrome. In the process, moreover, a host of non-profit entities are working on big grants from donors around the world, trying to ingratiate themselves, based on their own estimates and initiatives, with vulnerable groups, people in a state of emergency and more.

In my opinion, a proposal, validated and endorsed by the inter-parliamentary arena, aimed at offering scope through new technologies so that young people, in particular, may view the big monotheistic religions as an opportunity for enrichment and appeasement in our time, can be about an innovative program facilitating both learning and communication between and among young people of different cultural or religious backgrounds. Dealing a major blow to terror in the mid-run will, obviously, be based on knowledge and educating the youth. Many challenges lie ahead. Let us try to synchronise our pace and let us include cultural pluralism through interfaith peace in our priorities.
Honorable participants and guests,

I WOULD LIKE TO EXPRESS my sincere feelings of gratitude to the leadership of the Lebanese National Assembly for the warm hospitality but, mostly, for the ambience and the opportunity to speak from this lectern, honestly, openly and without any fear whatsoever. And this is anything but accidental.

Lebanon is one of the cradles of Christian culture. To Armenia and its people, Lebanon is a sacred place since, upon seeking to escape the Turkish yataghan, over 300,000 of my fellow country people took refuge in the blessed lands of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt. And the fact that there is peace, temperance and, most importantly, unity in diversity, today in Lebanon is principally due to, indeed, the greatness of its leadership in representing the most diverse religions and denominations.

I was very content with the speeches the Russian colleagues made. I listened carefully as they made it clear that in countries where illustrious leaders are in charge there is a perfectly mutual understanding between and among religions. The wonderful example of Bashkiria was mentioned. In addition, Professor Valery Alekseev, advisor to the I.A.O. Secretariat, made a really interesting speech elaborating on today’s complex geopolitical situation and his view suggesting that dialogue will not be possible in the years to come. And that is anything but accidental.

Of course, a question begs itself: why is it that dialogue will not be pos-
sible? Let us look into the economy to find out the reasons why. And what is the economy telling us? External debt accumulation in the United States is 107.48% of its GDP, meaning that U.S. foreign debt is over 20 trillion USD. The external debt of E.U. growth locomotives, such as France, Germany and Italy, is respectively in excess of their GDP, and we had better not broach this subject with regard to either Portugal or Ireland. Similarly, Great Britain’s foreign debt last year was 258% of its GDP.

But why am I so heavily focused on the U.S.A., the European Union and the United Kingdom? It is because they are the issuers of the world’s reserve currencies. It is because these countries, by accumulating external debt not hinging to their GDP, are essentially securing better living conditions for their people thanks to their minting machines printing currencies. The United States does so thanks to the Federal Reserve’s distributing new currency, the E.U. does the same through the European Central Bank with the U.K. following suit by means of its own Central Bank.

Under such circumstances, of course, the aforementioned centres of power in the global political arena could not care less about establishing a dialogue, let alone an interfaith one, since the absence thereof would allow them to regulate and wreak havoc into regions such as the wider Middle East. And this prescribed chaos would naturally benefit them financially for the simple reason that whenever there is an emergency capital gets transferred to safe havens, such as the U.S.A., the E.U. and, to some extent, Great Britain, too. The key lies therein.

All third world countries as well as developing countries with growing economies, incl. China, Russia, India, the Republic of South Africa, wish to resist that. As we speak, China is reaching out to developing countries to discuss boycotting the United States following a set of protective measures the U.S. announced it will be taking against it.

Last year the U.S. trade deficit with China alone was between 375 and 396 billion dollars. The state budget deficit for 2018, i.e. the fiscal year that started on October 7, 2017, is expected to increase by 1.836 trillion dollars. Who is going to cover for that? The rest of the world is. And the tools to implement the policy of global financial expansion are externally guided terrorist organisations that upset and undermine stability in the entire world.

Let us ponder on the following questions: was the Islamic State getting
its weapons from outer space or was there an open pathway to get them through Turkey? Were NATO members unable to intercept the flow of armaments? Is it accidental that Turkey is now being allowed to conquer Afrin which is on Syrian territory? It is all part of a long-term policy, the next step of which involves the conquest of Iraqi territory currently inhabited by the Kurds. And a perennial hotspot of tension would still remain, disallowing developing economies to get back on their feet.

Today’s conference affords us a chance to think hard. Let me seize this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to the organisers of the conference in the face of I.A.O. Secretary General Mr. Andreas Michailidis, advisors Mr. Valery Alekseev and Mr. Kostas Mygdalis as well as to the Lebanese hosts of ours.

The world is at a crossroads. And Russia is the only centre of power able to guarantee stability and peace for the whole wide world. Russia is implementing so honest and sincere a policy it conquers even the minds of its opponents. The proof of the matter is in the fact that the U.S. State Department said it is not going to object to Russia accrediting 60 new diplomats on its soil.

Thank you for your attention!
Honorable Members
of the Lebanese Parliament,
I.A.O and AIPU members,
Your Eminences and Graces,
Most Reverent representatives
of religions and denominations.

ON THE OCCASION OF THIS CONFER-ENCE on peaceful coexistence in the Middle East, a subject-matter greatly intertwined with the right to self-definition, I am deeply moved to be sharing some thoughts on how parliamentary and interparliamentary dialogue can and should contribute to strengthening isonomy (equality before the law) and isopolicy (equality or reciprocity of rights and privileges, as of citizenship).

Certainly, the role each Parliament ought to be playing today, and its discourse as a strong means of diplomacy, is of the essence for the whole world. Therefore, it is high time the contribution of parliaments be further enhanced to mark the start of a novel effort with humanitarian features, having a positive impact on peaceful coexistence and prosperity for the people, above and beyond racial backgrounds, religious choices, political views etc.

We are gathered here, in the Middle East, a region with rich history and traditions, the meeting place of major religions, where Christians and Muslims must continue to live within a multicultural society, the peaceful coexistence of which affects the global sphere intensely.

Ioannis Voulgarakis
Political Science Graduate
of the University of Crete
Progressive minds, seeking peace and a life of freedom, cannot but be more optimistic upon witnessing initiatives like this. And despite the violent attitudes and warfare that extreme fundamentalism breeds, along with hatred towards otherness and expansionist trends which greedy neoliberalism begets, the efforts of Parliamentarianism are sure to foster a continuous dialogue on all levels of political and interfaith processes to get a basis for proper information on religious tolerance, to smoothe differences out, to strengthen individual and social rights and to, eventually, help Democracy grow deeper roots.

The modern liberal democracy, with parliament as the most representative institution that lets citizens into the public arena, is still at the heart of this form of governance. After all, parliamentary bodies reflect, if not all then, definitely, the majority of the electoral body in every society.

A parliamentary body is the instrument which legislates and checks upon the executive branch. It, thus, connects with the people through its own communication channels. In addition, it is able, through synergies with other national parliaments, international organisations, religious leaders, representatives of the world of arts and letters, to deliberate and take measures to combat all forms of racism. Racism, should it not be managed on time, could turn into obscurantism and eventually fascistise societies, the consequences thereof being disastrous for mankind.

That is why proposals for closer partnerships between parliaments and interparliamentary organisations are on the right track. The creation of a permanent Forum for Dialogue whereby independent parliamentarianism will pursue convergence and concurrence to benefit freedom, equality and justice is endorsed and welcomed by everyone who aspires to a world of peace.

Thank you.
Your Excellency, Mr. President, Secretary General of the I.A.O.,
Dear advisors, ladies and gentlemen.

IT IS A GREAT PLEASURE for me and my colleagues, the members of the Syrian Parliament, to be here with you today.

First of all, it is a pleasure for me to convey the greetings of the people of Syria, the Speaker and the members of the Syrian Parliament. Greetings from Syria, the Levante, the land of jasmine and the lion’s den.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I will speak to you as an Arab citizen having rights and obligations towards his homeland, his loved ones and family, regardless of religion, colour or land of origin. As is standard practice in various places in Syria, the call for prayer from the minarets and the sound of bells touch the skies as a message of faith and obedience to the One and Only Maker. This is what brotherly relations and coexistence look like in our blessed Syria. This is not new; it is old and deeply-rooted in our Arab culture.

We all know the story of King An-Najashi (Negus) who welcomed the Muslims that fled Quraish oppression once the Prophet Muhammad urged them to leave Mecca and go to Abyssinia where the Christian King was kind and just and would do them no harm.

Moreover, we all know the story of Muhammad, Allah’s Prophet, who accommodated a Christian delegation from Nagkran at his sacred
mosque. It was there that, when the bells sounded the time to pray and his followers tried to hold the Christians back, the Prophet stopped them by saying “let them pray to their God”.

We, in Syria, believe that the source of all religions is one, it is God Almighty. All religions preach love, tolerance, reform, proper conduct, peace and collegiality between the various religious denominations. H.E. the President, Dr. Bashar al-Assad, stressed that “Syria is in favour of homogeneity and not mere coexistence”. There is a difference between the two. Coexistence suggests accepting the other whilst homogeneity signifies coexistence to the fullest, without prejudice or discrimination.

Syria is organically structured as homogeneous. The President has said that “the Christians are neither guests nor migratory birds coming through Syria. They are the foundation of our country’s existence”. His Beatitude John X, the Greek-Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, has highlighted the deep connection between Christians and Muslims as well as the loyalty of the Christians to our homeland, Syria. He said “The Muslims and the Christians are the two lungs of this East. What unites them is stronger than what separates them, despite the tough times. Our Church strengthens the language of staying on and ensuring continuity at home”.

Indeed, this is true collegiality. Islamo-Christian brotherly relations are a historic reality and a social necessity that citizens have been experiencing ever since the past. Maybe this fraternity, this homogeneity, has caused the wrath of terrorist warmongers, people who are racists and aspired to shaping a new image for the land of peace, the cradle of civilisations and divinely-inspired religions.

And since they can only speak the language of blood and annihilation, they have a distorted image, close to their own detestable image of reality and the image of those thugs and thieves who helped them out. We are pained by the fact that everything is happening in the name of religion, law and God. Religion, though, has nothing to do with it. After all, Islam and Christianity are two religions preaching love, tolerance and brotherly relations.

We, in Syria, are committed to protecting our country, our sacred land, regardless of acts of terror, killings and destruction, no matter how much the proponents of terrorism may be exercising political and economic
pressure. The homeland will always equal loyalty, dedication, dignity. It is the past and the future. The President confirmed that much and cultivated it in our hearts and minds when he said “the motherland is our right and protecting it is only fair. God supports what is right “.

Our warmest thanks, love and appreciation go to those who support what is right and provide support to Syria. Special thanks to Russia, our sister, friend and ally, as well as to Iran and the Lebanese resistance.

Last, ladies and gentlemen, let me stress that my country, Syria, as well our friends, brethren and allies gave martyrs to our sacred land, and their blood became one with the blood the Syrian army shed. That is especially true as concerns our brothers from sister Russia, Iran and the Lebanese resistance, who are fighting terror on behalf of the whole world.

The governments that prop up terror are asked to stop funding and supporting it, to protect people and humanity instead, to stand up for international human rights and law. For the sake of the world, for the benefit of Syria, we ought to resist international terror, Turkish hostilities against Syria and the heinous Zionist attack, and that can only be achieved through unity.

For the benefit of unity and power, let us ensure there is mutual respect and concord between us to combat all sorts of injustice and international terror and Israel’s Mossad who pursues the Judaification of Jerusalem and the alienation of cultural and historical features of the Arab world as well as the globe. This is the way for us, Muslims and Christians, to continue to live together, in one homeland, strengthening our religious, patriotic and ethnic values, to get this ship to a safe port and onto a bright future.

Lastly, let me thank you for the gracious invitation. Thank you to our brothers from the Lebanese National Assembly and thanks to the I.A.O. May God bless your efforts. May God give you and us success to benefit the countries and the people.

May you and Syria live free, under the leadership of President Dr. Bashar al-Assad.
In the name of God, the most gracious and the most merciful.

Distinguished participants,
Mr. Secretary General of the I.A.O.,

My thanks and gratitude go out to the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy and the people who helped make this Conference happen. I am also grateful to and appreciative of the Lebanese National Assembly for their hospitality.

Mr. President, dear participants,

THE MIDDLE EAST IS FACING SYSTEMIC waves of organised religious extremism, terrorism and community divides aimed to make its armies and its peoples weaker so that the countries of the region may be broken up, diverting people’s attention from the core problem which is the occupied territories of Palestine, including Jerusalem. This plan employs various advanced tools, terrorist organisations and groups that are active in the region and receive all kinds of support to incite religious conflict, dissent, communitarian fanaticism, within the same religion, even inside the same household.

Unfortunately, we know both the victim and the perpetrator. The perpetrator is relentless and strong, the victim is helpless. The perpetrator plans for, supports and trains, recruits, provides money and arms.
He makes no plans for today or tomorrow but plans ahead, in view of the next hundred years. He is targeting state infrastructure, education, health, culture, religions and women. He is especially keen on appealing to the youth, age 15 to 30 or 35, an age group which is the backbone of every army the world over. The perpetrator’s goal is to, moreover, alter people’s values, customs and habits so they fit into his planning.

We must understand the nature of such plans and challenges. We ought to take them seriously and to demonstrate international volition in a collective manner. Teamwork is necessary, partnerships between and among religious, political and social institutions from countries in the region are needed to tackle specific threats, but it is equally important to encourage a shared international will and to exercise pressure simultaneously. Without international volition, there can be no hope of finding any solution whatsoever to help the region because no one in the whole wide world ever managed to tackle the scourge of terror alone.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our divinely-inspired religions urge us to embrace tolerance, peaceful coexistence and to rebuild the earth. At a time when there is this universal call for respect for human rights, combating terror and extremism of all kinds can guarantee these rights. Let me, at this point, mention that when the Muslim Brotherhood was in power, our brothers and sisters, the Christians of Egypt, suffered as much as the members of the armed forces and the police. Nowadays, religious tolerance is at its best. Now is the time to ask ourselves what happened to the human rights of the martyrs who fell into the hands of Egyptian armed forces and police.

The perpetrator and the instruments of terror use mass and social media in a so-called “fourth generation warfare”, an information war to mislead the youth and cause domestic upheaval. These tactics must be tackled with positive thinking and information. Having said that, may I suggest, Mr. Secretary General, that our Assembly reach out to the world to voice its educated opinion by starting a satellite channel, airing the views of the I.A.O. and communicating information in a positive manner. And to quote our colleague Muamer Zukorlić “a good word preceeds a good deed, and a foul word preceeds a foul deed”.

Mr. Speaker, ladies and gentlemen,
Are we, the members of parliaments, who have gathered here, today, aware of our role? Are we aware of what is required and expected of us, in view of the future, to tackle those challenges? I am voicing my own concerns and shall leave the rest to the reports and the resolutions of this conference.

I can only hope and wish that, now we are celebrating 25 years since the establishment of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, the resolutions and the reports of this conference, which so many distinguished religious, political and parliamentary figures have been involved in, be robust, measure up and communicate a powerful message, unlike dozens of previous conferences the resolutions of which were stashed away in some drawer.

Once again, let me express my warmest thanks to the Lebanese National Assembly. Warm thanks to the I.A.O. Warm thanks to the distinguished participants. May God’s Peace, Mercy and Blessings be upon you.
Mr. Secretary General,  
Honorable Members of Parliaments,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

THE QUESTION OF COEXISTENCE among peoples has held this way in today’s deliberations “Unity in diversity and the fundamental freedoms”. This Conference comes against the background of the bombing in Syria that has put the country back to pre-civilization days.

Dear Delegates,

it should be remembered that 25th day of May 1948 the State of Israel was created by the organization of the United Nations. It is the responsibility of the United Nations therefore in these circumstances, to heal the wounds. And this has been exacerbated by the United States recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel removing away from Tel Aviv.

We are all deeply concerned looking at the daily deaths that are happening, the recent 17 deaths of the Palestinians. We are all deeply concerned we moan to the believed families and all hearts and thoughts are with the people of Palestine, the people of Syria, the people of Yemen, the people in this special region of the Middle East.

The relationship between Man and Nature has been dismantled to unprecedented levels. The freedom to manifest one’s religion is increasingly being chartered in this region of the Middle East.
Yet remembering that even Jesus was born in this region. How can we have come so low at a time when the World has attained the maximum civilization.

It is a question that puts all of us here in attendance as a way of finding the common position as a Body and in that regard, I will speak briefly about what is happening in Africa, and especially in Uganda. Trouble is not limited here but also in Uganda which is hosting over 500.000 refugees from the South Sudan. Another 180.000 refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are being hosted in Uganda. But even then, we consider other prejudice of Humanity, the waves of migrants to Europe, the deaths in the Mediterranean Sea, where Africans try to close from Africa’s all countries (Libya and the Sub-Saharan Africa).

But this issue has not ended there. Just recently, the French bodyguards raided one of the camps of these refugees and forced a Nigerian to undergo … in close violation of territorial boundaries of Italy. But to us, this is further related to the violations of human rights for the refugees in Africa and it seems that they have no rights at all. We also witness other tragedies: the Boko Haram, that has abducted children in Northern Nigeria, we have the war going on in Somalia and I must report that last Sunday of April, Uganda lost 46 of his soldiers in Somalia. Uganda has close to 10.000 soldiers keeping peace in Somalia. But on Sunday, using the boober traps and the K-bombs. Uganda lost 46 of its soldiers at the hands of Al-Shabaab.

Not to mention other challenges we have in Africa: the constitution manipulations, where the leaders all of a sudden changed the Constitutions, as it happened in Uganda last December, where you have time limits, they are removed, where you have age limits, they are removed and this creates a situation of hopelessness and causes violence within ourselves but also violence with other extremist groups that are said not only to destroy what good has created and the unity amongst the peoples but to create a state of fear and terror in the name of religion.

From what I have had here, there are too many aggressors, according to all the speakers in this … the State of Israel that has made it impossible for the people of the Middle East to live together in peace and it has been going on and this has been exacerbated by the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital city of the State of Israel by the US Administration.
In addition to that, ... of the speeches the expansion and the occupation tendencies of Turkey. Turkey has equally cause a lot of suffering not only in Syria, but also in Cyprus. Cyprus has been on the World Agenda and it is a shaming that no serious resolution is adopted in the UN General Assembly about Cypriot question. Those that were adopted have remained ignored and we feel concerned at this people cause if we cannot be bound by the World Body, who shall bind these reckless regimes. Look what is happening in the neighboring Syria. It is still Turkey. But this has been complicated by the political realities. The political realities are ... to point out. “A friend of your friend is your friend” and “your friend of your enemy is your enemy”. But we as Christian Orthodox we must find a delicate balance between the two: How one can be a friend of your enemy and remains your friend. We are in a very difficult situation. We as the I.A.O., how could we consider for instance the US declaration Not only has it given an escalation to the conflict in the Middle East. But it has put ... to be charged in ... of the Middle East, as the disputed owner of the Middle East. And the US is our friend. That’s why, we as the I.A.O., we have a challenge. But as we speak now, Russia has launched the nuclear capabilities with the Turkey, cause if Turkey remains the undisputed leader of the region not only it will continue with expansionism but also it will continue to be an aggressor in Cyprus, in Syria and in many others. For the members engaged, our friends to engage Russians one hand. But also the USA to be engaged to the same level. In a way they are helping the region by solving the problem in Syria, but they are exacerbating on the other side with the promotion of one aggressor in Lebanon.

I want to thank you for your kind attention and may God bless this land.

Thank you!
Honourable participants,

MY SPEECH REVOLVES around the subject of the conference: unity and diversity.

Life in all its forms, plants, animals, people, is based on diversity. Doing away with diversity equals doing away with life itself. There is neither life, nor unity in life, without diversity. Human communities are based on diversity in all its forms: ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, communal, doctrinal etc. Whenever religious and political institutions have proceeded, or are proceeding, with the abolition, repression or marginalisation of diversity there was, and is, conflict, war and disaster. Whenever institutions proceeded, or are proceeding, with accepting and recognising diversity there was, and is, stability, interaction, growth and prosperity.

In the name of religion, history has been rife with wars and horrific slaughters between religions even in-group conflicts between followers of the same religion. Many societies are still suffering, openly or secretly, from religious, communal and doctrinal conflicts. The commercialisation of religion was, and still is, a profitable business that takes advantage of people’s ignorance, emotions and instincts, undoing the power of reasoning which God endowed us with enabling, us to consider, think, judge, decide and act.
Christianity came along and then Islam to set people free from subjugation. Let us elaborate on three relevant pillars.

First: Subjugation to the tribal totem
Prior to Christianity, each tribe, or race, had its own totem, an object of veneration, visible or not. Every tribe had its own God, which it chose for itself alleging God had chosen it. The circle of moral values was limited within the context of the tribe whereas the circle for evil and aggression was open and demonstrated itself outside the tribe.

Christianity destroyed the totemic arrangement and Islam, accordingly, rejected the idea of an exclusive tribal god or the chosen people of a particular god. According to Christianity, God is there for all, indiscriminately. According to Islam, God is there for all and not just one specific people or the proponents of a specific religion or one denomination.

The notion of God’s unity for all, in every way and form, was actually, what undid the tribal and racist totem. It acted as the foundation for a culture of peace among all the peoples. True monotheism is about believing there is one God for all, not one exclusively for you and your tribe, your religion, your denomination alone.

Should this conviction no longer apply, we go back to the totemic culture, to lethal and destructive racism, thinking that God has chosen us and only us, setting us apart from all other people, religions, communities and denominations. We think of ourselves as the judges and the jury and, should others disagree with us, they are called the infidels who must be marginalised and annihilated, both morally and materially.

Second: Subjugation to the totem of literalism and blind imitation
Saint Paul the Apostle said “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life” (2 Corinthians, 3:6). Inflexible thinking, which insists on adherence to the exact letter, kills creativity and progress and leads to retrogression.

We must allow critical reasoning to kick in every time a text, be it religious or not, is being read or processed, having always in mind the interest of society as a whole, not the interest of one single group or a specific category.

Unity in our society must be the starting point for our values, the compass for our attitude, orientation and goals. Our society can be fair
to others across the globe, based on respect for communal diversity, be it tribal or other.

All societies have been through wars, slaughter, clashes, conflicts that exhausted them, obstructed progress and destroyed communities owing to fanatical attachments, local perceptions based on the illusion of superiority or the illusion of being in possession of the one and only truth.

Societies that got past the phase of inner conflict built their unity upon recognising diversity with equity for all, i.e. equal rights and responsibilities regardless of religion, origin or race. True equality is guaranteed in the Constitution and through the laws of a properly functioning human society with freedom for all. Actually, where one's individual freedom ends, the freedom of the other person begins.

There are still societies experiencing divides, conflict and deadly clashes due to inflexible thinking being shackled to blind imitation and a literal attachment to the exact letter of the revered texts while ignoring the spirit and the content thereof. Such communities are still living in the Middle Ages, fostering fanaticism, the illusion of superiority, feeling special not because of some scientific or scholarly achievement but simply because they believe they own a particular religion, denomination or race.

Third: Subjugation to the totem of the instinct of the herd
Communities that count on their instincts find satisfaction and grow complacent through the instinct of the herd. The members of a herd share the same illusion about their origin or the same commitment to a particular community, religion or doctrine, so the entire community adopts a singular perception about itself and others. This fanatical attitude is the result of stereotypes generated by institutions inside the community. Despite the fact that Christianity and Islam preach extraversion and the elimination of barriers between people, tribes or races, many communities and denominations are in such a state of dogmatisation they treat those ideas as counter to and in breach of the teachings of both religions. The instinct of the herd relies on fear and panic vis-à-vis others outside the herd. Fear of existential security challenges, food safety, hostilities, fear because of a neighbouring yet different commu-
nity, all make the herd rally around its leader. Individual members must always be in a state of emergency, in constant fear of possibly suffering from hunger, to remain attached to the figure of authority. Fear grows stronger, the state of ignorance and illusion deepens, lies persist, reasoning stops, the mind gets flooded with myths and superstitions while critical rationalism and creativity are obstructed.

God is the Maker and gave no-one the right to judge. Religion is unthinkable without freedom, without the right of people to have faith. Religion nurtures a power inside, at the level of the conscience, that empowers believers to do good and to dodge the temptation of evil. Religion cannot be a state-like authority or else it would no longer be based on the freedom of choice but rather on coercion and imposition. A state that rules in the name of one single religion, community, denomination, tribe or race is a state that represents only the communities in the name of which it rules but it could never guarantee equality for all. The secular state keeps an equal distance from all religions and communities, ensuring stability and inner peace because it treats various communities within the same society in an equal manner. As a result, it secures unity by preserving the wealth of diversity which blossoms in an ambiance of justice, equity, freedom and the supremacy of reasoning.

Please allow for a final remark. Certain colleagues spoke about a two-state solution to the Palestinian issue. I am addressing these colleagues in saying that this is outside Christianity. Christ told the Jews: “Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar and the father of it” (John, 8:44). He, moreover, said: “You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of” (Matthew, 12:34). In addition to what Christ said, I agree with a great adage by a remarkable figure and leader, Antoun Saadeh, who said “We are all Muslim, meaning we submit to the will of the Maker. Some submit to the will of Allah via the Quran, others to God via the Gospel, some of us submit to Wisdom. The enemy that fights us in our religion, homeland and right is the Jews”.

Thank you.
Honourable participants,

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM has only recently become a codified right and is indeed much older than terms, concepts and texts in which this right was introduced and promised.

And all human history, especially here, in this part of the world, clearly carries in its shadow constantly the question of religion, that is, religious right, as well as religious freedom.

The Lord wanted exactly here, right here in this part of the world, a multitude of nations and a multitude of faiths to emerge through the passage of time.

Accordingly, through sincere faith, we humans know that the Lord Himself wanted to create a multitude of diversities in unity here. And this unity is life. Present and future life.

This is how it is today and it will surely continue and will remain perfect in the future through diversities, through various confrontations and conflicts.

The roots of such a future, which should not scare anyone, lie in the depths of the past. And to those who study it, they are constantly revealed proving to be a reliable lesson for tomorrow, for the future.
Since I come from a Christian, Orthodox, familiar environment, I know that the main reason behind any progress made for the good is possible only in conditions of serenity, simplicity, honesty and tolerance.

Our Holy Fathers say that we find God only through peace, tranquility. And they quote this in the Gospel: “Learn from me, for I am meek and humble at heart!”.

So, we do not learn about peace from books, schools, various political or scientific institutions, people, but through God’s message, who calms our minds and hearts.

Peaceful thoughts that calm the heart and soul. We calm our whole being. It is the one that leads us to patience.

And surely you know, even the father of all of us, Adam, left only one element to his naked sons, and that is patience!

Therefore, whoever wants to be tolerated by others, should and must tolerate everyone else.

Hence, we easily conclude that the future of this complex, very complicated world depends on understanding, tolerating and calmly observing what people need. And people need peace and faith. People need religious freedom. All these constitute conditions for peace, both regional and general.

Also, as we all know, Christianity and Islam, regardless of their differences, which are constantly emphasized by those who do not want peace, have many positive similarities. These similarities must be constantly highlighted and reiterated.

If we refer to them in the context of the Middle East, regardless of the fact that Christianity was created five centuries ago, we should not forget that its seed sprouted in the very area of Palestine. It flourished here, thanks to our Lord Jesus Christ, and from there its spread begun.

However, if instead of faith there is a question of other issues, then the question of faith as a real source of mutual understanding ends up being projected as a possible cause of some unacceptable relationships. No one disputes that there have been misunderstandings in the past that escalated into wars, starting with a religious basis. Some misunderstandings still exist today. However, religion does not advocate misinterpretation and misunderstanding, problems and discord. Instead it supports consensual relationships, friendly behavior and brotherly acceptance of the other.
From Serbia, from which I come, and represent, and which is neither close nor far away from Lebanon, we see, thanks to some of our similar experiences, that we have a lot of common ground in this unity of diversity. In our country, as well as here, we seek maximum respect for religious freedom, free religious expression, coexistence and respect through the overall diversity of religious communities.

Indeed, Lebanon is a unique example of such an endeavor, which gives the fruits of reason from which, constantly, sprout plants of diversity. These plants are different religions and nations, churches and all other holy places that do not separate people but, on the contrary, connect them. Thanks to these fruits of friendly relations, brotherly behaviour is part of this world. Joy to people of honourable feelings around the globe, and an example to the Middle East, how we can talk, negotiate, and achieve success of the common good, in peace!

Thank God it is so.

And, of course, thank you and everyone who wants to invest at least a little spiritual, personal and intellectual effort to understand this fundamental truth.

Wishing all of you, our peoples, the world, patience in the mind, serenity in the soul, joy in the heart and peace in the eyes, I sincerely thank you for your attention.
Speaker of the Parliament of Lebanon, Members of Parliaments, Dear colleagues, Dear friends,

I WOULD LIKE TO THANK the Inter-parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy for inviting me to this important conference. I am honoured to be here with you today for many reasons.

First, because the focus of this conference is more timely than ever. Second, because it is a topic that deserves to be openly discussed at parliamentary level. Third, because the event is organised in Lebanon. A country with a history of confessional diversity. An example for the whole Middle East region.

And finally, because “Unity in Diversity” is at the heart of our humanitarian work. And it is, somehow, the other side of the European Union’s motto “United in Diversity”.

Dear colleagues, First, discussing openly religious diversity and religious freedom in the Middle East is crucial.

Because we have been witnessing increased violence in so many countries. Attacks and persecution against religious communities. Radicalization prevailing over tolerance.
In the absence of tolerance, neighbours and friends become strangers. They are no longer neighbours and friends. They become the “others”. The “others” become the enemy, the target. Places of worship have become “privileged” targets by those who spread hate, terror, and death.

We all remember the suicide attacks in April 2017 against two (2) Coptic churches in Egypt. That left forty-seven (47) people dead and hundreds injured.

Nobody can forget the massive bombing and shooting against Sufi Muslims in the mosque in North Sinai. That claimed more than three hundred (300) lives.

Ladies and gentlemen,
We have witnessed the massive forced displacement of thousands of persons belonging to religious minorities: Christians, Yazidis, Shia Muslims.

In Iraq and Syria, in particular. Victims of blind hatred against their religious identity.

Lebanon is enduring the consequences of the protracted conflicts in the region. This a country courageously hosting more than one (1) million refugees.

**Second**, I strongly believe that it is extremely important to hold this discussion at the parliamentary level. I served as a Member of the House of Representatives of Cyprus. And as a Member of the European Parliament. Therefore, I fully appreciate the importance of engaging national parliaments on critical issues like the one we are discussing.

Members of Parliaments have a unique duty. Their mandate is to address the concerns and priorities of the people they represent. They can make decisions that lead to concrete initiatives and actions. I am sure the declaration that will be adopted later today will move towards this direction.

**Third**, holding this conference in Beirut carries particular significance. Lebanon has always been a multi-confessional society. Different ethnic and religious communities have lived together for centuries.

Despite the differences. And after dark times of civil war, religion became again a driver for peace. Difference was transformed into diversity.
The Lebanese society mirrors this reality. The Government of Lebanon and the Parliament of Lebanon reflect the reality of this diversity.

Representatives of the Lebanese people of different confessions work together. This is unity in diversity. Despite its many challenges, Lebanon remains an example for the region.

Dear colleagues,

The topic of this conference is very close to my heart. Coming from Cyprus I have experienced division. Reconciliation is always a real challenge. And, at the same time, an absolute necessity. It requires determination and courage.

But for all of us who believe in reconciliation, diversity can become a driving force. Different communities need to be open to dialogue.

And be ready for fair compromises. This has always been my belief. As a politician. And as a citizen.

The topic of this conference is also very close to my everyday work, as a European Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid. And it gives me today a great opportunity to talk about the other role of humanitarian assistance.

Humanitarian assistance is meant to alleviate human suffering. But it can go well beyond this. Humanitarian assistance can also act as a catalyst for reconciliation and co-existence. Even in zones of intense conflict and in situations of high division.

Humanitarian assistance can be a strong force for reconciliation. The principles of humanitarian assistance make it a “bridge builder”, humanity, impartiality, independence, neutrality.

Its commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms makes humanitarian aid a strong advocacy channel for their respect and protection.

As humanitarians, we operate on the basis of need, without discrimination. We deliver assistance to the Christians in Mosul and the Muslims in Myanmar. In exactly the same way.

We help the Sunni and Shia population in Iraq using the same means. There is absolutely no difference between Syrian Sunni and Syrian Alawite refugees when we distribute aid.

People may belong to different ethnic or religious communities. But
in times of crisis, all people have the same needs. Need for protection, shelter, food, healthcare, education. And people’s needs have priority over any religious or other differences.

Humanitarian aid unites diverse populations into a common ground. To build confidence. And to promote reconciliation.

Let me share with you my experience from my numerous visits on the ground. From the talks I had with humanitarian workers, local authorities and local people.

I would like to talk about Mosul. Mosul has always been a mosaic of ethnic and religious communities. That co-existed peacefully for centuries.

This diversity of Mosul was one of the reasons why the city suffered so much in the hands of the Islamic State.

During the difficult years of hatred and intolerance, humanitarian aid played a special healing role.

In Mosul, we continued our humanitarian assistance. And in addition, our efforts paved the way for the initial stages of reconciliation.

We established the Trauma Stabilization Points we established. Close to the frontline. People from western Mosul were treated in these centers. Sunni, Shia, Kurds, Yezidis, Turkmen.

Muslim patients put their lives in the hands of Christian doctors. People learned again to rely on each other. Mutual trust was developed.

This is reconciliation in action. Not just words. This is unity in diversity.

Moreover, Education in Emergencies can play a similar healing role. For many years, children were exposed to Islamic State’s curriculum of violence and hate.

When I was in Mosul, I visited a joint UNICEF-Save the Children Education in an Emergency project, funded by the European Union.

Muslim and Christian girls and boys benefited equally from these projects. They study together. They play together with the support of teachers from different ethnic and religious backgrounds.

In conflict zones, Education in Emergencies has a protective role. Protecting against abuse. Protecting against exploitation. Protecting against forced recruitment. It helps heal unspeakable traumas through much needed psychosocial support.

Education in Emergencies gives hope and provides skills for the future.
Helps children who have missed out months or even years on education to get back to school.

Very importantly, quality *Education in Emergencies* promotes peace and reconciliation.

Strengthening social cohesion and helping to address the root causes of violence and extremism and promoting inclusive learning environments. And finally, providing a safe havens for all children.

I have visited many similar projects in other countries as well. In Lebanon. In Turkey, Jordan, Greece and in several countries in Africa.


*Education in Emergencies* gives prospects to children. This is why *Education in Emergencies* has become my priority. My “obsession”.

Since the beginning of my mandate, I increased funding to *Education in Emergencies* by eight (8) times. And I am committed to spend more energy and more funds on Education in Emergencies. So that no generation is lost.

Dear colleagues,

Before closing I would like to recall the key role of religious leadership in promoting diversity and tolerance among different religious communities.

First, through interfaith dialogue. By setting the example. Remember the march in Paris after the attacks against Charlie Hebdo of the religious leaders of the four (4) main confessions in Albania.

The Orthodox, Catholic, Sunni and Bektashi religious leaders walked side by side. In solidarity. Against religious extremism. This is true *unity in diversity*.

Youth can offer fertile ground for interfaith dialogue and tolerance. Remember the tens of thousands of Muslim youths who acted as guards in Jordan, protecting churches and helping Christians celebrate their holiest festivity in peace.

This was the best response to the attacks against the Coptic churches in Egypt in April 2017.

And second, through open and transparent communication. Religious institutions are very well positioned to counter violent extremism. And to promote moderate narratives that favour diversity.
The European Union supports the work of religious institutions through a variety of initiatives. For example, the projects funded by the EU Foreign Policy Instrument in Lebanon.

Projects that support the Sunni Council’s Dar el Fatwa network in mitigating the appeal of radical ideas and in promoting moderate approaches.

Dear friends,

“Unity in Diversity and the respect of fundamental rights and freedoms are preconditions for a prosperous Middle East.

Once a hub of diversity and tolerance, the region has been challenged by protracted conflicts and violence.

We all know that ethnic and religious minorities will be key to rebuilding the region. Reconciliation is not an easy task. It requires openness and cooperation from all sides. But reconciliation is a prerequisite. There is no alternative to achieve real peace, security and prosperity.

Humanitarian aid has a key role to play. A cohesive role. For reconciliation. By preparing the ground for the much wanted peaceful co-existence. In diversity. And in unity.

Thank you.
Ladies and gentlemen,

I WOULD LIKE TO EXTEND my warmest thanks to the organisers, the Lebanese Parliament, the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy and the Arab Interparliamentary Union, for giving me the opportunity to address your very important conference through this video message.

This great initiative could not be more timely and relevant. Not far away from where you are gathering these days, a war is still ongoing where lives are being tragically destroyed or lost, with millions of people being obligated to leave their homes, putting their lives in danger to find safety.

Europe, too, has been affected by the arc of instability in our neighbourhood, from Ukraine to Tunisia. Migration and refugee pressures, but also the threat of terrorism, do not stop at borders. The appalling attacks in Sinai last November and Cairo last December remind us that terrorism continues to threaten us all, across nations, borders or religions.

At the same time, divisive rhetoric, xenophobic and islamophobic discourse are spreading in our European societies, targeting those most vulnerable among us and creating divisions between us. In recent years, we have witnessed events challenging long-standing, deep-rooted relations of peaceful and prosperous co-existence and cultural interaction.
The recent migration crisis has proven to be a turning point. The European Union and I, as Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship, are strongly committed to keeping Europe open and tolerant, ensuring protection to those in need regardless of their origins, cultures and beliefs.

We all have a duty to work on building bridges, fostering and deepening mutual understanding but, most importantly, reciprocal cultural respect and solidarity. In my opinion, this is the only way to create more tolerant, respectful and open societies. We have to stop those who want to tear us apart.

The truth is that we all need each other in this joint endeavour, whether it is to better manage migration or to fight terrorism and radicalisation. And we have to do this without putting the blame on certain communities, which are instead an integral part of the big society we all live in.

At the same time, we are aware that there is a long road ahead. We need to enhance sincere dialogue and mutual trust between the various communities and among ourselves. It is important to invest in our common historical, cultural and religious bonds. We all have to stay united and work together, whichever faith we may uphold. I sincerely believe your Conference is a strong base for our future common efforts. The main message we are all sending together is that diversity is strength, not weakness, for our societies.

With your Conference, you, parliamentarians from all over the world, prove that diversity lies in unity, that the dialogue between Christians and Muslims is deeply rooted in our history and that it will shape a better future for the whole world.

Thank you.
In the name of God, the most gracious and the most merciful.
Blessings and Peace upon our Prophet Muhammad, the last and final Messenger.

TO BEGIN WITH, allow me to express my gratitude, and that of the House of Representatives of Jordan, to H.E. the Speaker and the National Assembly of Lebanon along with the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy for inviting us to this conference.

This is an opportunity to discuss a major issue that everyone in the region is talking about, i.e. this very delicate juncture for the entire Middle East.

I come from Amman, whose minarets and churches embrace the minarets of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Church of the Resurrection, which are being subjected daily to all sorts of violence as a result of the occupying state’s practices, against the backdrop of systemic efforts by a terrorist state wishing to eradicate the people and to judify Christian and Muslim places of worship.

Religious fundamentalism has by now become an instrument that big powers use to control the region to promote division and dissent. Religious fundamentalism is a tool for a demographic sorting aimed to help such powers fulfill their political aspirations.

This particular region has been, and still is, in a predicament because
of plans counting on religious fundamentalism to be a political instrument to further self-serving goals and pursuits.

This is clearly and irrefutably evidenced by what Iraq and Syria have experienced, making it imperative that at this delicate point in time there be some serious interfaith dialogue between Christianity and Islam to forge a common perception, to prepare the right backdrop to consolidate notions favouring coexistence, to enhance the principles and values that can lead us to unity, to have a common understanding of all the issues and the problems we are facing as a region.

The greedy states that colonised the region enforced the principle of emotional divide and conflict intentionally on the people of the same country in their effort to prevail. As a result, countries that fell prey to those predator states now need them to get political solutions in place, solutions which are often self-serving and detrimental to the people of the region. In this delicate junction we are living, I feel compelled to share our own experience, in Jordan, where there is coexistence, tolerance and reconciliation among the offspring of the same people and where we have never used the term “minority”.

The society of Jordan consists of various groups, be they sizeable or not. Be advised, nonetheless, that the Constitution and the laws of Jordan guarantee justice and equality for all Jordanian citizens. They all have the same rights and obligations, everyone is treated in the same manner, regardless of origin, skin colour or religion and all are equal in the eyes of the law. Yet, I must admit there is discrimination in some small groups.

We, in Jordan, have secured the participation of Christians in the political arena by setting a minimum for their representation in Jordanian political institutions. They, thus, have a voice and help decision-making. We have created a participatory framework for coexistence where there is no discrimination against the children of the same society. The notions of citizenship and collective identity unite us in one single country under the auspices of a leadership that keeps us together under the same roof, with the same laws and the same constitution for all.

On that note, let me once again thank you for the invitation. God willing, this meeting will become a hub for dialogue between Christian and Muslim leaders for them to come up with a shared approach for crisis
management in the region, to eventually build a broad foundation for dialogue with the West, between the Arab Islamic world on the one hand and the western world on the other, and to devise a plan to deal with the problem of terrorism wherein religious fundamentalism is being taken advantage of in the pursuit of political goals.

Thank you.
Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,
May God’s Peace, Mercy and Blessings be upon you.

TO BEGIN WITH, let me extend my thanks and appreciation for the invitation and the hospitality offered to the honourable MPs.

On a clarifying note, I wish to underline that Christians in the East are not a majority. Fewer though they may be, they are the children of the Arab land, they are hugely influential and of great service to their communities, with everything they have given, their knowledge and sacrifices.

The Christian Arabs of the East were, according to previous estimates, 25% of the region’s total population. Sadly today, because of a criminal perpetrator known to all, their numbers have dropped dramatically. As a matter of fact, wherever there is evil you should look for the Jews. To quote my colleague Tarek Khoury “look for the Jews since the coming of Christ and through today”. Who was it that created the organisation currently known as Daesh/ISIS? Who was it that allowed the “Islamic State” to spread and expand into Iraq and Mosul? Who drove the Christians out of Iraq? Who drove the Christians out of Palestine? Palestinian Christians used to approximate 1/4 of the local population. Today the Christian population of Palestine is hardly 2%. This
is all Israel, aka Judaism. This is all about the Israeli dream of a Jewish state. Israel wishes to rid the entire region of Christians, to eliminate the Christian element, to eventually expand and pursue its objectives for the Jewish state.

We, in Jordan, are a school for coexistence. For instance, I reside in the south, in the Alkaraq prefecture. We have been living next to an old Jordanian family, the Almagkalis, for centuries. We have been living together like family for hundreds of years. There was never any discrimination against me, the Christian, or my Muslim neighbour, who I am aware, is an Almagkali when I am a Zureigat. There is a bond that connects us all, the children of Jordan. What I am describing, what we indeed experience in Jordan, could have never been made possible without the path for tolerance our leadership paved. The Hashemites play their role in enveloping human relations with dignity, bringing together all elements of society.

Let us not suggest that the Christians are being marginalised, for in Jordan the Christians have a place in all fields and sectors, the political arena and the economy. The most important cabinet ministers, currently, are Christian. The Minister for Investment is Christian, the Minister for Public Works is Christian, the Minister for Water Resources is Christian. There are four Christian ministers running the biggest state ministries in Jordan.

We, parliamentarians, all religious officers and statepersons, must resist this bleak expansionism affecting the region. Today, I am cursing everyone who has contributed to the blow our beloved Syria was dealt, everyone who is responsible for the bloodshed and the tears of Syrian children. I am neither exempting Israel, nor Turkey who has played a fundamental part in dealing a blow to many countries in the region. As we speak, Turkey is taking advantage of the situation in Syria; it is expanding, it is killing and displacing a key demographic element, the Kurds. Yesterday, unfortunately, it destroyed churches and many renowned Christian cultural heritage sites.

I do not wish to take too much of your time. May all religious and political leaders in the region work closely together as religion was never meant to cause dissent. Religions are here to foster compassion, love
and communication between the people. Those responsible to accomplish that, be they Christian or Muslim, ought to work together to deal with everything mankind is facing. After all, the decline of humane values is affecting everyone, Christians and Muslims alike.

May Peace and God’s Mercy be upon you.
Honourable Mr. President of the I.A.O. General Assembly, Honourable Mr. Secretary General, ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon.

FIRST OF ALL, I wish to extend my warmest thanks to the gentlemen of the Lebanese National Assembly as well as to the ladies and the gentlemen of the I.A.O., headed by Mr. Secretary General, who provided us with the opportunity to participate in this important event.

We come from Palestine, from Jerusalem, the capital city of religions, and Bethlehem, the birthplace of Christ, with a message of peace and love. We are here, having left behind approximately 5 millions of Palestinians who are under siege and oppressed, with as many having migrated, become refugees and members of the diaspora.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Christians of Palestine will be celebrating Easter next week. This religious celebration, like dozens before it, is going to take place amidst a siege by the forces occupying the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. There are dozens of fixed barricades; the occupied part of Jerusalem is

Omar Rahal
President of the Human Rights and Democracy Media Centers, Palestine
surrounded by huge walls and permanent road blocks. How can it then be possible for a Palestinian Muslim or a Palestinian Christian to go to the Church of the Resurrection or the Al-Aqsa Mosque? Palestinians are banned from entering Jerusalem to work, study, receive medical care or practice worship. In addition, Palestinians are not allowed to get to either Gaza or Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

Ladies and gentlemen,
We are calling on you to dedicate some of your time to reading the laws the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, adopts. There are dozens of Israeli laws and legal provisions that run counter to international human rights conventions. As we all know, the principles of international law are applicable and no violation thereof is to be tolerated. Today Knesset is an accessory to the crime. The Israeli Parliament, and the Executive, since it is the occupying power, are ignoring international human law, and in particular the Geneva Convention, especially the Third and the Fourth. Human rights law in no case exempts the Knesset from its obligations vis a vis the inhabitants of the occupied Palestinian territories.

We are calling on you, we beg and ask of you to stand by our side in dealing with Israeli arrogance, to help restrain Israeli aggressiveness against our children, while urging your countries to recognise the state of Palestine.

Ladies and gentlemen,
we believe that tolerance, dialogue and the acceptance of diversity are perfect to avert and avoid violence, trials and tribulations and wars. But what are we doing about it? Just think: Israeli violations of Palestinian rights started on the year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in 1948. We, in Palestine, have extended a hand for peace and dialogue to resolve the conflict but the occupation forces and the international community have turned their back on us, while procrastinating, making promises and being evasive. Don’t we, maybe, have the right, just like any other people on this Earth, to self-determination, and a state of our own on the soil of our homeland?
We are enjoying life and relish in it. We detest murder, displacement and bloodshed. We, in Palestine, are pained and deeply concerned about our children, our youth, women and the elderly. We are, nonetheless, pained and deeply concerned about children, young people, the elderly and women elsewhere, in Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Iraq and Egypt. We are pained and deeply concerned by all this irrationality, obscurantism, violence, extremism and terror.

We are pained by the image of injured members of obscurantist gangs who are treated at the hospitals of the Israeli occupying power while being supplied with arms, equipment and money from political regimes that disrespect human rights and do not recognise Democracy as a way of life.

Ladies and gentlemen,
allow me to greet, on my behalf and on behalf of my colleagues of the Palestinian delegation, our Arab brethren who are standing by us, Lebanon first, Syria, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq, in recognition of the sacrifices their armies and their people made in defending Palestine. We are bowing before them, with our small stature, theirs being grand.

Kudos, also, to our friends, the Russian government, headed by H.E. President Vladimir Putin, and the people for their steadfast, sincere and historically significant stance as well as for providing unlimited support to the Palestinian people and the Palestinian issue.

Special acknowledgements, also, to the heads of the delegations for the speeches they made, their genuine emotions and noble feelings towards the Palestinian people.

Lastly, let me remind the occupation forces that the Christians of Palestine are neither ephemeral nor passers-by. They are the true owners of the land, the salt of the earth. The Christians of Palestine are not a minority: they are history itself. History is the child of Geography and Geography shall not change.

Ladies and gentlemen,
Palestine is a rare case in point. We are all Christian in Palestine. We are all Muslim in Palestine. We are all Palestinian in Palestine. He, who
said during an Israeli attack against the Gaza Strip, in 2014, “if they bomb the mosques, then go to our churches to call on your people to come and pray” cannot but have been an Arab, a Christian, a Palestinian. This is Palestine.

Peace be upon you.
Mr. Secretary General
of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy,
ladies and gentlemen,
distinguished participants.

WE APPRECIATE THE INITIATIVE of the I.A.O., in partnership with the National Assembly of Lebanon and PUIC, to have this Conference at this particular point in time when the Middle East is being afflicted by tension and division.

This very region is the cradle of the three biggest monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. People in the region are the product of those religions. Therefore, interfaith coexistence is a historic legacy because people in this part of the world have been living together for centuries. They secured their rights through humankind’s natural constitution before they even had laws and state constitutions.

Nevertheless, the wave of fanaticism and terror, and the tensions of the Arab Spring, shook up the foundation of symbiosis between religions, races, denominations and nations living together in the region. Therefore, it fell upon us, parliamentarians and statespeople, to work together to restore peaceful coexistence to its previous, its initial, form.

There is fertile ground along with a background of coexistence, laws
and constitutions guaranteeing equal religious, civil and political rights based on citizenship. So, to help restore a viable backdrop for coexistence, we must proceed as follows:

**First:** Revise the curriculum to encourage a culture of peace, love, acceptance of the other, regardless of religion, origin, skin colour and consolidate a spirit of good citizenship.

**Second:** Regulate religious speech to stop hate and divisive speech. Let us utilise all of our common religious ground to promote a culture of coexistence and acceptance.

**Third:** Dissociate religion from politics to protect the former, rationalise the latter and have the homeland live.

**Fourth:** Roll out awareness-raising programs and campaigns to educate and inform the people, with emphasis on the multitude of religious traditions aimed at social cohesion.

**Fifth:** Regulate the content social and mass media disseminate to replace negative messages with positive ones instead. From this pulpit, I recommend that all types of content generated, and communicated via the mass media and/or social media, to incite intolerance and foment division be treated as a criminal offence and that it be added to the list of press offences punishable by law.

**Sixth:** Opt for using the term “religious coexistence” and not “tolerance” because the latter has negative connotations in Arabic and suggests forgiving some error.

Finally, let me thank you. May God bless us, and each and every one of you, with success in our mandate to serve our people and help restore peace.
Mr. Farid Makari, Deputy Speaker of the Lebanese National Assembly, presiding over the Inaugural Ceremony expressing the pleasure of the Speaker Mr. Nabih Berri for holding the I.A.O. Conference in Beirut
At the conference on coexistence of Christians and Muslims in the Middle East, 49 participants made speeches and interventions.

His Beatitude Patriarch John X Patriarch of Antioch and the entire East of the Greek Orthodox Church, addresses the I.A.O Conference.
WE, PARLIAMENTARIANS – REPRESENTATIVES of peoples from Parliaments of the Christian Orthodox and the Muslim World, convening today here in Beirut, upon initiative of the Parliament of Lebanon and the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, on a historical and particularly critical moment for the Middle East.

With zones of civil war and destructions in Syria and the attempt by third countries to violently dismember the country.

With inopportune political decisions by the USA political leadership recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the ongoing occupation of Palestinian territories by Israel.

With the still open issue of the abduction of Metropolitan Paul of the Orthodox Church of Antioch and the Syrian Orthodox Metropolitan Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim of Aleppo, who have been missing for five consecutive years.

We first express our concern and raise a voice of protest over everything that is happening in the area of the Middle East, condemning most emphatically such behaviors.

Recalling the long-term historical, political, but also religious bonds that unite us,

Recognizing the need for a constructive political but also interreligious dialogue in our era,
Wishing to contribute in the consolidation of the concept of international peace and security and promoting policies for peace today and in the future.

Making efforts to eliminate phenomena of religious fundamentalism and violent extremism that plague regions of the world,

**We declare that:**

Parliamentarism, as a representative institution of citizens and a place of formulation and expression of their demands, is a critical factor of intermediation between peoples and their leaderships, both political and religious. Therefore, with respect for interreligious and interethnic dialogue, tolerance for diversity, and safeguarding of fundamental human rights, parliaments are required to construct an enduring relation of trust with civil societies.

Relations of democratic countries’ parliaments with the representatives of culture and religious leaderships must be based on transparency and accountability. At the same time, we express our deep concern over the current inexistence of such inter-faith dialogue in the Middle East, we express our hope that such dialogue restarts and we make efforts for establishment of dialogue Fora between parliamentary institutions and religious communities on local and international level.

Elimination of all sorts of discrimination is pursued through parliamentarism, and parliaments will be taking the necessary legislative measures to this effect, in view of combating racism, intolerance and hate speech. Implementation of education and social programs for youth, focusing on the critical knowledge of religious traditions and democratic principles of social cohesion, can have a decisive role to this effect.

Our Parliaments will pursue to strengthen the legal and regulatory framework aiming to:

(a) ensure the necessary compatibility of national legislation with the most important universal texts on protection of human rights
(b) promote the identity of national, cultural, language, religious or ethnic groups and their right to live in community with others
(c) interreligious and interethnic dialogue on the national and global level.
Our Parliaments will promote measures leading to the creation of more representative and more effective parliamentary bodies. Measures to enhance this perspective are, among others:
(a) Establishment of minimum representation quota for minority populations of religious or other nature, in committees with parliamentary and law-making tasks, where feasible
(b) Assessment of the impact of legislation and financial aid to ethnic and religious minorities suggested by the Governments
(c) Measures such as joint parliamentary working groups, the introduction of a legal framework for synergies, exchange of information and good practices among political bodies to combat violent extremism
(d) Reinforcement of traditional religions, acknowledging their role in the historical journey of each country. A special institutional status may be attributed thereto, affirming their institutional character.

For protection of human rights, especially religious rights, the Parliaments will take initiatives such as:

(a) allocation of resources for awareness-raising activities on matters related to culture and religion
(b) access of minorities to all parliamentary bodies, to express their needs and safeguard their rights
(c) welfare policy making for minority groups.

In order to protect freedom of preserving the existing religious beliefs, Parliaments will care for protection of their citizens’ identity, ensuring the right to religious education in schools, religious access to state establishments, as well as their presence in the state-owned and private Mass Media.

Parliaments will pursue strengthening of dialogue among religions, by actions such as:

(a) financial or other support from international sources to international parliamentary organizations and prestigious international fora supporting the interreligious and interethnic dialogue,
(b) activation of parliamentary diplomacy to resolve interreligious conflicts,
(c) support of interreligious initiatives aiming to better understanding of the others,
(d) organization of conferences, seminars, two-day meetings, congresses and sessions having as central theme the interreligious and interethnic dialogue,
(e) establishment of a permanent joint parliamentary body responsible for information and coordination of actions,
(f) deployment of observer or peacemaker teams to societies exiting violent conflicts with a strongly religious character.
Virgin Mariam

Icons from Her Holy Garden Mount Athos

An Exhibition of Athonite Engravings

from 3 April to 4 May 2018
The Monastery of Philotheou, Copper engraving, 56x41.6 cm
Mount Athos, 3 February 1847
Engraver: Monk Cyril
FROM THE 5TH CENTURY, with the gradual outspreading of ecclesiastical feasts in honour of the Mother of God and the erection of churches dedicated to her, the veneration to her person was consolidated in the East primarily. Her position in the Christian world was crystalized in John Damascene’s (676-749) phrase “We honour and reverence the Mother of God”. Among the feast days consecrated to Theotokos, some relate to the life of Jesus Christ (the Presentation of Our Lord in the temple, the Annunciation of the Virgin Maria, the Synaxis of Virgin Maria), others to events of her life according to the church tradition (the Nativity of Theotokos, The Entry of the Most Holy Mother of God into the Temple, The Dormition of Theotokos), and others are in remembrance of miraculous deeds performed by the Theotokos (The Life Giving Spring, the Placing of the Honourable Robe of the Virgin Maria and the Holy Girdle).

According to a very old Christian tradition, after the end of her life on earth, mother of Jesus Christ was buried near Gethsemane, but “shortly afterwards the body disappeared” because it “was assumed into Heavenly Glory”.

An ancient tradition recorded in Athonite codices, describes the relationship of Virgin Maria with the Holy Mountain. It narrates that – on her way to Cyprus and owing to a storm – she found herself at the Athos peninsula. In admiration of the land’s beauty, she asked her Son to give her this place as “her own” in order to turn it into a place of repentance.
for those who wanted to depart from “the worldly deceptions”, knowing that soon this place “shall be filled by orders of monks”.

Thus, in the Athonite tradition and practice, Mount Athos became the “Garden of Virgin Maria”. Mother of God became the Abbess of Athos and the monks became the workers of repentance, praising and venerating her as a model of purity and moral perfection and seeking her intercession as Mother of God. Further, the request of Theotokos to her Son: “glorify this place more than any place” was fulfilled in the historic course of Mount Athos, as the latter acquired and retained its ecumenical character.

The Christian iconographic tradition relating to Virgin Maria is, of course, very extensive. In the works of the Athonite monks especially, there is a plethora of iconographic types, some of which took their final form in the byzantine era while others received more recent influences. The names vary depending on the Virgin Maria’s posture, the feasts days of her worship, the miracles attributed to her or the place connecting to the icon.

Especially, in the Athonite engravings, there are scenes from the Theotokos’ life, connecting with the historic tradition of the Athos monasteries. There are certain prevailing iconographic types among the hundreds of engravings of Mount Athos: The Queen of Angels (Maria holding child Jesus, surrounded by angels), the Platytera – Wider than the Heavens (seated in her throne, holding infant Jesus, having a cloud as a foot rest, or standing with her arms outstretched), the Virgin Lactans (breastfeeding the baby), Panagia ‘Glykophiloussa’ –The Sweetly-Kissing– (touching the child’s chick with hers), Hodegetria –She who Shows the Way– (in bust, slightly turned to the right in relation to the viewer, holding Jesus in her left arm and He, blessing with his right hand), the Unfading Rose (in royal garb, seated holding Jesus in her left arm and a rose in her right hand), Axion Esti – ‘It is truly meet’ (the Theotokos inclines her head slightly towards Jesus supporting Him with her left hand, while with the other touches his right hand itself holding an eilitarion or scroll) etc.

Paying tribute and worshiping the holy icons, is an essential part and parcel of the Orthodox Church doctrine, which accepts “that the images of our Lord Jesus Christ as man, and those of the undefiled Mother
of God, the ever-virgin Maria, and of the honourable Angels and of all Saints, should be venerated and saluted”.

With every step we take in each and every monastery of the Holy Mountain we come across miracle-working icons of the Theotokos that are witnesses of the living tradition of her visible presence. Indicatively: In the Protaton we see the icons of the Axion Esti (‘It is truly meet’) and the Synaxis of the Saints of Athos; In the Great Lavra Monastery, the miracle of the Most Holy Theotokos with saint Athanassios and the Panagia of the Prodromou skete; in the Vatopedi Monastery, the Annunciation, Panagia Esphagmeni (The Slaughtered) (the name refers to the accidental damage caused to the icon by a monk), and Our Lady “Vimatarissa” (the main icon of the monastery, placed on the Synthonon in the holy altar of the katholikon); the Our Lady of the Gate – Portaitissa (Gate Keeper) situated in a chapel close to the gate of the Iviron Monastery; Virgin Maria the Tricherousa (The Three-Handed Virgin – according to the iconographic type of “Hodegetria”) in the Hilandar Monastery, depicting also the hand of John Damascene severed on account of his iconophily and restored thanks to a miracle performed by the Virgin Mother) and the Virgin Lactans – breast feeding - in the Typikarion in Karyes; in the Pantokrator monastery, the icon of Virgin Mother Abbess – Gerontissa (interceding in favour of an abbot); in the Philotheou Monastery, the icon of Panagia Glykophiloussa – The Sweetly-Kissing--; in the monastery of Dionysiou, the icon of the Akathist Hymn, possibly the oldest one on Mount Athos.

It would be impossible to imagine the world of our own East without the century long worship of the Theotokos Maria. Her tradition – in the form of texts reproduced– could not be divided from the rich iconography, the hundreds of icons in reference to the Virgin Mother. Throughout the almost eleven centuries of continuous monastic life, the Holy Mountain accumulated immutable traditions that are reflected in the portable icons and engravings of the Theotokos; it also accumulated “representations” that incessantly revive the century long traditions. At times, the secular researcher feels perplexed faced with this interaction that is not met with in a secular environment; he feels that the monks live on the Holy Mountain in order to give substance to the traditions.
and that they become the living vehicles of the old continuity. Moreover, if the human mind was to accept the miracle of Jesus’ birth by the Virgin Mother, it would be rid of all contradictions and vain questions; and the old continuity would acquire its full meaning once again. Tradition then would not be seen as coming from the past but as pouring out from inside of us; becoming our daily reality.
The Choirs from the Greek Orthodox Church of St. George and the Islamic Al-Mabarrat Charity Center singing hymns honouring the Theotokos (Virgin Mary)

Opening of the Exhibition “Virgin Mariam. Icons from Her Holy Garden. Mount Athos” at the Beit Beirut Cultural Center
The Virgin Axion Estin, Copper engraving, 55.4x42.3 cm
Mount Athos, 1866
Engraver: Unknown
“After this common prayer and in the presence of our father and archbishop Elias, I find myself speechless, no words can truly express this moment.

I would like to welcome each one of you in this place in which the whole story of our beloved Beirut is engraved. This site holds our wounds of the past, our history and a lot of lessons, that’s why we made sure during the renovation phase on keeping it’s identity because we wanted it to be more than a site for dialogue and convergence, we wanted it to be an inspirational and motivational message from the past and the future of this country. Unfortunately the past cannot be changed but the future is yet in our power.

At the end I would like to thank the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy for giving us this great opportunity, to enjoy the majesty of this heritage coming from the Holy Mount Athos.”

His Excellency Mr. Ziad Chebib, Governor of the City of Beirut
Our Lady Portaitissa (Keeper of the gate) and the Monastery of Iviron, Copper engraving. 59.8x50.3 cm, Moscow, November 1838 Engraver: Unknown
“Our peoples, in the Christian East and the Arab world, look forward to a parliamentary action that carries their issues and highlights the value of man at a time when political action, on many of its initiatives, has become a series of economic agreements with a geopolitical character; agreements that promise human freedom, peace and justice while violating his/her integrity and depleting the human resources and natural wealth of his/her countries.

Recently, the Middle East has been experiencing the rise of the ideological extremism that professes religion. It pursued policies that invoked the fight against extremism, turning the region into an arms market, a slave trade, seas of blood and tears, and illicit money. In such equations the human person is missing, as well as his/her issues. Priorities become negotiations and transactions that serve the interests of one or the other powerful country.

The exhibition of the copper engravings of Mount Athos and the icons of the Theotokos Virgin Mary, remind us that the concept of the icon is based on the truth of the Revelation of the person of God, through man who has been created in His image and likeness. Man is the purpose of the Divine Creation, the civilizations in their manifestations and their succession, and religion in its purity. Man is God’s image on earth, the crown of creation and the purpose of history.

The East is the cradle of Orthodoxy, the meeting place between the Roman and Arab culture. Perhaps the most eloquent message we send from our experience in this region is that honesty in politics and relationships, as well as the belief in a true meeting with one another, are now an imperative need for societies; they become the only way for building man and enjoy the richness of the various religious heritages, the horizons of creation, offering and development within the experience of common life.”

His Eminence Metropolitan Elias of Beirut, Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch
The Monastery of Great Lavra, Cooper engraving, 69.6x49.2 cm
Mount Athos, 8 July 1868, Engraver: Unknown
“Lebanon and the wider Middle East region have always been places of meeting and coexistence of peoples with different religious and doctrinal beliefs. This coexistence was not always unalloyed. It was often disturbed and not rare, has led to violent conflicts costing human lives on all sides. In the present period, this coexistence has also taken on an institutional form in the context of the functioning of the state scheme of the Republic of Lebanon. The various institutions are distributed proportionally among the country’s main religious communities.

In the context of this climate of understanding and peaceful coexistence, March 25 has been designated as a day of joint celebration of the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary, commemorated by both major monotheistic religions, Christianity and Islam. This fact could not leave our organization indifferent, since one of the basic statutory principles of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (I.A.O.) is the interreligious dialogue and the peaceful coexistence between different religions, denominations and doctrines.

It was therefore decided to organize an exhibition of engravings from Mount Athos, on the icon of the Virgin Mary. The exhibition that is taking place in the Lebanese Parliament, with the title: “Virgin Mariam. Icons from Her Holy Garden. Mount Athos,” is dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and is being conducted in the framework of the International Conference “Unity in diversity and basic principles of freedom for Christians and Muslims in the Middle East: A conference on parliamentary dialogue”. The exhibition is housed in an emblematic building, in Beit Beirut, an operations center in the country’s recent civil war, perfectly preserved, and still perforated by the bullets of the warring parties. At the opening of the Exhibition under the Governor of Beirut Mr. Ziad Chebib, in the presence of the Metropolitan of Beirut, Elias, we also host music groups which accompany the event with Muslim and Christian hymns to the Virgin Mary. The presentation of the exhibition raised a great interest to the Lebanese capital and is widely covered by local media.

We consider this exhibition to be one more practical contribution of our organization in the context of understanding and peaceful coexistence in a common place of people, with different cultural and religious beliefs.”

Dr. Andreas Michailidis, I.A.O. Secretary General (07.07.2016 to 17.09.2020)
The Monastery of Hilandar, Copper engraving, 72.4x51.4 cm
(Vienna), 1779, Engraver: (Zacharias Orphelin)
Restored: Mount Athos, early 19th c.
“With great satisfaction, the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (I.A.O.) currently presents to the citizens of Beirut and to the entire peaceful Lebanese people the exhibition of paper icons with the title: “Virgin Mariam. Icons from Her Holy Garden. Mount Athos.”

The exhibition is organized by us with the support of the Governor of Beirut, Mr. Ziad Chebib. It takes place in the framework of the conference on the parliamentary dialogue with the subject: “Unity in diversity and fundamental principles of freedom for Christians and Muslims in the Middle East” held in Beirut on April 3rd and 4th by the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (I.A.O.) in collaboration with the Lebanese Parliament and the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union.

The Virgin Mary (the Theotokos, God-bearer) — is a historical and sacred person not only for Christians but also for every Muslim of good will. Her figure, over the centuries, expresses the care and love for every suffering person. In this way She supports the efforts we all have made to solve the problems that arise in the modern world as well as to achieve peace in the wider region of the Middle and Near East.

It is the duty of every human being who feels socially responsible, to contribute, among other things, through the joint initiatives of citizens and parliaments, to the search for peaceful solutions that will eliminate the fear from the hearts of citizens and contribute to the survival and development of the poor and weak of the world.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the establishment and launch of the interparliamentary activity of the I.A.O., which, ultimately, aims to support every human who wishes personal and family peace and happiness, extending a hand of co-operation with the hope for assistance and collaboration, to any institution, religious or social entity, that contributes to the peace of the world.

I wish a successful, an interesting and fruitful tour to all the visitors of the exhibition.”

Sergei Gavrilov, President of the I.A.O. General Assembly (since 26.06.2018)
The Monastery of Simonopetra, Copper engraving, 77.4x53.2 cm
Mount Athos, 20 May 1868, Drawer: (Dionysios the painter)
Engraver: Ioannis Kaldis
“The message we are sending is that Orthodoxy is present in the long-suffering Middle East as a force for restoring harmonious relations, understanding and peaceful coexistence.”

We are very happy that the exhibition with the copper engravings from the Garden of the Virgin Mary was made possible, here in Beirut, in the heart of the Middle East. The radiance of Mount Athos remains bright for over a millennium, enlightening every corner where Orthodoxy remains alive. Orthodoxy survives in spite of the times, here in Lebanon, but also in Syria and in this huge and suffering region, despite the centuries full of trials, persecutions, and martyrdoms.

As members of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (I.A.O.), we also had the pleasure to see that the heart of Orthodoxy beats here. The byzantine Commonwealth, as a culture, as a union of believers, as a living tradition has not disappeared. It is the duty of us all to strengthen it in every way. Especially in our East, where a long-lasting Genocide of people and monuments is taking place, we must stand by our suffering Orthodox brethren.

I hope that the Resurrection of Christ, which we are going to celebrate in a few days, will also mark the Resurrection of the Christians of the Middle East, following the martyrdom’s path they have gone through for many years.”

Dr. Maximos Charakopoulos, I.A.O. Secretary General (since 17.09.2020)
Dr. Maximos Charakopoulos in conversation with His Beatitude Patriarch John X of Antioch

Dr. Maximos Charakopoulos is extending his gratitude to the Head of the Lebanese delegation to the I.A.O. Mr. Ghassan Moukheiber, for his contribution to the implementation of the Conference and the Exhibition “Virgin Mariam. Icons from Her Holy Garden. Mount Athos”

Dr. Andreas Michailidis and Mr. Sergei Gavrilov offer a commemorative gift to Mr. Ghassan Moukheiber
The Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy is an inter-parliamentary institution based in Athens, set up upon the initiative of the Hellenic Parliament. The I.A.O held its first meeting in Halkidiki, in June 1993. The I.A.O consists of Orthodox MPs from Europe, the US, Asia, Africa and Australia.

The I.A.O’S aim is to develop the Orthodox cultural heritage, enhance communication between its members in order to promote the role of Orthodoxy in dealing with current social problems on the basis of the principles of democracy and Christian values and contribute to the global dialogue for human rights and peaceful relations between nations.

The Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy is an inter-parliamentary institution based in Athens, set up upon the initiative of the Hellenic Parliament. The I.A.O held its first meeting in Halkidiki, in June 1993. The I.A.O consists of Orthodox MPs from Europe, the US, Asia, Africa and Australia.

The I.A.O’S aim is to develop the Orthodox cultural heritage, enhance communication between its members in order to promote the role of Orthodoxy in dealing with current social problems on the basis of the principles of democracy and Christian values and contribute to the global dialogue for human rights and peaceful relations between nations.

Acknowledgments:
Thanks to the President of the Hellenic Parliament Mr. Konstantinos Tasoulas for the printing of the volume by the Hellenic Parliament

Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy
22-26 Vas. Amalias Av., Athens 10557, Greece
Tel.: +30 210 373 3600 / 373 3553 • Fax: +30 210 373 3512 • Email: info@eiao.org
Website: www.eiao.org • Facebook: www.facebook.com/eiao.org

Top Cover: Manuscript copy belonging to the Ioannis Skylitzes Madrid Codex with 574 miniatures of Matr. Vitr. 26-2, Synopsis of Histories, 12th - 13th c. The manuscript refers to the embassy of John the Grammarian sent by the Byzantine emperor Theophilos 831 A.D./214H-Islamic calendar

Bottom Cover: Beit Beirut «the house of Beirut» is a museum and urban cultural center celebrating the history of Beirut and namely the civil war (1975–1990). The cultural center is in the restored Barakat building, also known as the «Yellow house», a historic landmark designed by Youssef Aftimus.