

Violence against Christians in the Middle East

Recommendation 1957 (2011)¹

1. The Parliamentary Assembly recalls that Christianity had its beginnings in the Middle East 2 000 years ago and that Christian communities have existed in the area since that time.
2. These communities, which are made up of autochthonous people, have been declining in numbers for the last 100 years, mainly due to a combination of low birth rates and emigration, which, in some places, is fuelled by discrimination and persecution.
3. The situation has become more serious since the beginning of the 21st century and, if it is not properly addressed, it could lead to the disappearance – in the short term – of Christian communities from the Middle East, which would entail the loss of a significant part of the religious heritage of the countries concerned.
4. The number of attacks on Christian communities rose worldwide in 2010, as well as the number of trials and death sentences for blasphemy, which often affect women (as in the case of Mrs Asia Bibi).
5. Relations between Christian communities in the Middle East and the Muslim majorities have not always been easy. Discrimination is reported throughout the region and extreme violence has occurred sporadically in several countries. Public authorities in some Muslim countries have not always conveyed the right signals about religious communities existing in their respective countries.
6. Two recent events were particularly tragic: on 31 October 2010, a hostage taking in the Syriac catholic Cathedral of Our Lady of Salvation in Baghdad ended in the massacre of worshippers, 58 of whom died and 75 of whom were wounded. A suicide bombing in a Coptic church in Alexandria killed 21 people and wounded 79 as worshippers were leaving midnight mass on 1 January 2011.
7. The Assembly condemns these attacks in unequivocal terms and expresses its sincere condolences to the families of the victims, its sympathy to the wounded and its solidarity with their families.
8. It recalls that freedom of thought, freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, including the freedom to change one's religion, are universal human rights, enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which every member state of the United Nations has committed to guarantee. It wishes also to draw attention to Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966, to the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion and Belief of 1981, to the reports of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, and in particular her reports of 29 December 2009, 16 February

¹ Assembly debate on 27 January 2011 (7th Sitting) (see Doc. 12493, report of the Political Affairs Committee, rapporteur: Mr Volontè). Text adopted by the Assembly on 27 January 2011 (7th Sitting).

2010 and 29 July 2010, to Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights and to Article 10 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

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

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

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

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

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

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

12. The Assembly calls on member states to:

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

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

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

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

12.5. refrain from encouraging the members of the Christian communities in the Middle East to seek refuge in Europe, except in cases where the survival of such communities becomes impossible; in the latter cases, member states should take fully into account the recommendations of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in dealing with asylum and return issues and fully comply with European Court of Human Rights judgments and interim measures under Rule 39;

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

17. Finally the Assembly calls on the European Union to enhance its monitoring of the situation of Christian and other religious communities in its political dialogue with the

countries of the Middle East and to link its neighbourhood policy, including financial aid, to the degree of human rights protection and awareness in those countries.

Sursa: <http://assembly.coe.int/main.asp?Link=/documents/adoptedtext/ta11/erec1957.htm>