Patriarch Kirill met with President of the State of Palestine Mahmoud Abbas

February 14, 2018 – His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia met with President of the State of Palestine, Mahmoud Abbas, at the Patriarchal residence in St. Daniel monastery in Moscow.

Mr. Abbas was accompanied by Mr. Abdel Hafiz Nofal, the State of Palestine Ambassador to Russia; Mr. Ahmed Majdalani, member of the PLO Executive Committee; Mr. Mahmoud Al-Habbash, presidential adviser on religious affairs; Mr. Nabil Shaath, presidential adviser on international relations; Mr. Nabil Abu Rudeineh, spokesman of President Mahmoud Abbas; Mr. Majdi Khaldi, presidential advisor on diplomatic affairs; Mr. Khaled M. M. Miari, minister plenipotentiary of the Palestinian embassy in Russia; and Mr. Khodr Az-Sifeiri, special councilor of the President of Palestine.

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was represented by Mr. A. Rudakov, deputy director of the Middle East and North Africa department.

From the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations (DECR), there were Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, DECR chairman; Archimandrite Philaret (Bulekov), DECR vice-chairman; Archpriest Igor Yakimchuk, DECR secretary for inter-Orthodox relations, Archpriest Sergiy Zvonarev, DECR secretary for the far abroad, and Deacon Andrey Titushkin, DECR secretariat for the far abroad.

Welcoming the high guest, Patriarch Kirill noted that the Russian Orthodox Church attached a great importance to the Moscow Patriarchate's continued dialogue with representatives of Palestine.

'The Holy Land has always been in the center of our life, our heart', His Holiness said, 'It is a place associated with special spiritual remembrances of the sacred events in human history. For this reason, for us everything that takes place in the Holy Land has a certain importance and attracts our heightened attention'.

Over half a million pilgrims from the Russian Orthodox Church come to the Holy Land annually, and most of them also visit the territory of the Palestinian state, His Holiness said, adding, 'This circumstance alone gives a very considerable importance to our relations with the State of Palestine, but there are still more reasons for which we believe our dialogue is important'. His Holiness pointed to the

role and importance of the State of Palestine in the settlement of the Middle East problem.

Last year the Russian Orthodox Church marked the 170th anniversary of its presence in the Holy Land. 'The mission was founded in the 19th century in order to help our pilgrims who used to come to the Holy Land in great numbers. This service of support for the pilgrimage is continued today. The Russian Ecclesiastical Mission works to ensure that Russian Orthodox Church pilgrims coming to the Holy Land could be surrounded with consideration and care, that their stay there could be peaceful, calm and safe, that the Russian Church could give them spiritual support. For this reason, the settling of problems aimed to achieve a lasting peace with justice in the Holy Land is so important for us'.

Patriarch Kirill expressed the conviction that the key to the appeasement in the historical Biblical lands lies in settling relations between Palestine and Israel, stressing, 'It is our deep conviction that a lasting peace may be achieved through negotiations with due consideration for the lawful interests of the sides with understanding that the special status of Jerusalem should be preserved and the appropriate conditions for religious work in the Holy City should be guaranteed'.

The Russian Church has closely followed the developments in the Middle East, especially in Syria and Iraq, the Patriarch said. 'It is quite obvious that an overwhelming defeat has been inflicted on the terrorist forces, but terrorism has not been eliminated completely and there remains the danger that terrorist activity will continue in the Middle East – which cannot but disturb us'.

The Russian Church is especially disturbed by the fact that as a result of the hostilities, civilians are killed and religious shrines and architectural monuments are destroyed, His Holiness continued. 'Both in Syria and Iraq a great damage has been inflicted on religious establishments – churches and mosques, destroyed are also remarkable monuments of ancient architecture. During the hostilities, both Muslims and Christians have died'. He expressed compassion to the families of the innocent people who were killed in this conflict.

His Holiness drew the attention of his guest to the fact that since Christians in the Middle East are a minority and the losses of the Christian population are especially deeply felt. 'A very large number of Christians have left Iraq; many were killed as a result of the hostilities; many have left their homes. I allude primarily to the north of Iraq, Mosul and the surroundings, but in Syria too there are great losses in the Christian community', His Holiness stated. It is very important he said that ruined Christian churches and mosques should be restored or built anew.

The Russian Church continues to take care of its compatriots who reside in Palestine, the Patriarch said pointing to the traditionally good attitude in Palestine to Russian residents It was noted during the meeting that the Russian Center of Science and Culture in Bethlehem, which was opened in 2012, has

been very helpful in consolidating their ties with the Motherland and introducing Palestinians to Russian cultural traditions.

During his talk with Patriarch Kirill, President Mahmoud Abbas expressed condolences over the tragedy that happened on February 11 when an An-148 airliner crashed in the Moscow region. ‘Two days ago we sent our condolences to President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin over the crash of the Russian plane. In this terrible tragedy, 71 people have died. I also would like to use our meeting to express my condolences to you’, Mr. Abbas said.

He noted that traditionally good relations have been established between the Palestinian leadership and the Russian Church. A hope was expressed for a further increase in the number of Russian pilgrims who come to the Holy Land.

‘I would like to note the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the peaceful settlement, in the arrangement of pilgrimage to holy places’, the high guest said.

According to the President of the State of Palestine, a great number of people have died in recent years at the hands of terrorists. ‘The struggle with terrorism should be waged in all parts of the world, and we adhere to this principle’ Mr. Abbas stressed adding, ‘Precisely for this reason in the recent years we have concluded 33 agreements with 38 countries, devoted to the struggle with terrorism and extremism’.

He said that Christians living in Palestine are not a minority but considered equal to all the rest people of other religions. They are Palestinian citizens who enjoy all the rights. He also noted that the country leaders give equal attention to the religious holidays of the three Abrahamic religions. ‘We come to such celebrations and take part in organizing them’, he said.

The sides exchanged opinions on the pressing issues on the common agenda.

In conclusion of the talk, an exchange of tokens of the meeting took place.

DECR Communication Service

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