



Remarks by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk during his meeting with members of the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), 5 April 2011, Danilovskaya Hotel

1. I would like to welcome such a representative delegation of the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee to the Russian land. With the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church is represented at this meeting by the head of the Moscow Patriarchate's department for church-society relations, Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, and myself in my capacity of chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations. We will share with you our opinions concerning issues which are a matter of concern for you and which are related to the problem of the Middle East. We will also be glad to listen to your considerations and to answer questions from the audience.

2. The Russian Orthodox Church attaches great importance to her relations with the authorities of the United States of America. The Department for External Church Relations has maintained contacts with the US Embassy in Moscow and especially with the head of the US diplomatic mission, Mr. John Beyrly. This February I visited the USA where I had several meetings with state officials. The focus of these meetings was an account of the inner life of our Church, her external activity and experience of service in today's world.

We highly appreciate the fact that your organization stands for the repeal of the Jackson-Vanik amendment which was adopted at the height of the cold war and which hampers the development of American-Russian relations today. We also give a high value to the concern of your organization for broadening relations in the triangle Russia-Israel-USA. It is my conviction that the time has come to overcome the artificially-erected dividing walls in relations between our nations.

3. The Russian Church has a long history of constructive dialogue with the Jewish community in the USA. For over thirty years we have been in close cooperation with the Appeal of Conscience Foundation founded and led by Rabbi Arthur Schneier. During my recent visit to the United States I had a talk with him which has left good impressions. We work together to promote initiatives for developing interreligious cooperation, including on the platforms of international organizations. At present we are working out a mechanism of high-level dialogue between traditional world religious communities in partnership with UNESCO.

4. For Orthodox Christians the Holy Land is a special magnetic place, where the Lord Jesus Christ lived, died and was risen from the dead. After the lifting up of visa system between Russia and Israel in September 2008, the number of our citizens coming to Israel has grown considerably. Among them are Orthodox pilgrims from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and other countries under the pastoral responsibility of the Moscow Patriarchate.

As is known, there are many of our expatriates living in Israel – which is an additional favourable factor in relations between our countries. This factor is often underestimated. The Russian Orthodox Church gives a special importance to the efforts to preserve unity in the multinational diaspora of our expatriates throughout the world.

5. We are aware of the efforts undertaken by your organization to foster peace in the Middle East and to promote the negotiation process between the Israeli Government and the leaders of the Palestinian Autonomy. The Russian Church is interested in good neighbourly relations between peoples living in the Holy Land and consistently advocates a peace settlement of the long-standing conflict. The confrontation has lasted for many years now and cost many innocent people life and health. The conscience of any believer rebels against the situation of permanent bloodshed in places held so dear. Precisely for this reason a resolution of the Middle East problem is unthinkable without an appeal of all peoples in the region to their religious traditions which can keep people from violence.

The Russian Church is convinced that the Holy Land should be made a place where the faithful of all world religions could freely profess their beliefs and have access to holy places.

Unfortunately, the peacemaking contribution of religions in the Middle East settlement remains to a large extent unclaimed. The work of international mechanisms is closed in fact for the participation of religious leaders. The expressly secular nature of international organizations makes believers not subjects of peace settlement but rather objects of all kinds of programs and actions elaborated without their involvement. As a result the situation becomes even more aggravated. The Russian Orthodox Church is ready to act as mediator in the peace process, offering her assistance to the sides of the conflict.

6. Israel claims to be a secular state, but unfortunately this claim has often led to disregard for the feelings of believers, not only those of Judaism but also other religions. In the Russian Church, we felt regret at the reports about holding the so-called 'pride parades' of homosexual minorities in the Holy City. We are convinced that only traditional morality can be a solid support for the life of society and relations between people. This is why it is so necessary to have dialogue between religious communities, the state and all the public forces so that its results could be lived up in the order of the socium.

7. I would like to share with you my concern over the recent social and political developments in North Africa and the Middle East. A change of political regimes and clash of interests between various public forces lead to a situation of uncertainty, an outburst of violence and lawlessness. There is a threat today that power in these countries will be seized by radical Islamists notorious for their calls for reprisal against both Jews and Christians. We can see growing Christianophobia which results in pogroms of Christian churches and killing of Christians. All this happens with the still persistent anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in the background. The world community should rise in defence of the right of everyone to confess one's faith freely and to live in accordance with religious norms and principles.

In this connection, I highly value the fact that the European Parliament adopted on January 20, 2011, a Resolution on the Situation of Christians in the Context of Freedom of Religion. It is for the first time that the European parliamentarians stated in full voice their opinion on the problem they have preferred to keep silent about so far. Thus, a major political body of the European Union has recognized the persecution of Christians in the world. Earlier, only certain politicians have confined themselves to talks about certain violations of the rights of Christians in a particular country. Now they are talking openly of the strategy of some terrorist organizations and fundamentalist movements aimed at the destruction or ousting of Christians living in the Moslem countries as "the fifth column" of the West.

Besides, a thorough attention was paid for the first time to the work of people gathering objective information about persecution of Christians in the world. For instance, it was for the first time that information contained in the annual report prepared by a non-governmental organization, "The Aid to the Churches in Need", was made public officially. According to it, there were seventy-five Christians out of every one hundred killed as a result of religious intolerance in recent years. This statistics is stunning.

The European Parliament addressed the EU bodies and proposed concrete methods of influencing the situation. The principle is simple: money and business in exchange for the observance of human rights. Economic agreements between the EU countries and the states with the recorded violation of religious freedom of Christians and other religious minorities should be concluded only when the situation of religious groups infringed in their rights is improved.

We are witnessing cases of not only gross violence against Christians, but also of their physical destruction. The blood of Christians is again being poured on the land of Biblical history, the site of glorious heroic deeds of the martyrs and confessors of the Church.

Not only world Christian communities, but also Muslims, Jews, and representatives of other traditional religions do not stay indifferent to the recent acts of violence. It is a paradox that news of the oppression of Christians come sometimes from those regions of the world where representatives of different religions have peacefully coexisted for centuries, and any manifestation of Christianophobia,

Islamophobia and anti-Semitism has always been implicitly denounced by the leaders of traditional religious communities.

8. In conclusion, I would like to cite the Prophet Isaiah: “For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem’s sake I will not remain quiet” (Is. 62:1). Let these words of Holy Scriptures inspire us in our desire to bring well-being to the Biblical land.

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