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Session 2

To:

**OSCE
OSCE Member States
Syrian Arab Republic
International
Organisations**

Dear participants of the meeting, ladies and gentlemen!

I would like to draw your attention to the situation in Syria and the Middle East not only in relation to the critical condition of the region, but also in relation to a high degree of religion-driven rationale behind the ongoing conflict. It is of great importance for all OSCE participating States, because refugees and migrants from the Middle East will undoubtedly preserve the historical and mental bonds with the region of their indigenous residence. Thus, either the integration of refugees into hosting states or their return to the Homeland will always be determined both by the fate of the Middle East and the role that hosting states play in shaping historical reality.

A few years ago, Syria and other countries that are now drawn into the conflict served as an example of a peaceful coexistence of different religions. Such unique coexistence has been forming for hundreds of years and is the basis of peace in the region. At the Council in Bari religious leaders expressed their agreement that it was this presence and peaceful coexistence of various religions that underpinned the stability in the region. Therefore, it is necessary to make every effort to preserve Christianity as well as other denominations, which have recently become a persecuted and discriminated minority.

It is well-known, that the refugees from Syria are fall into two broad categories: the first half left Syria illegally through Turkey, while the second half did it legally through Lebanon. The first half immigrated to Europe, while the second – to the USA, Canada and Australia. Most of the emigrants have already been granted citizenship or temporary residence for a period of 3 to 8 years. Host countries were more loyal to Christians and granted refugee status to them

quicker than to other groups. Perhaps the reason for this was the fact that Christians are considered more peaceful and easier to adapt and socialize, while by accepting of Muslims the country would face the risk of getting potential extremists. But in fact, this situation served as an additional reason for the exodus of Christians from Syria and led to the breakdown of the roots of the cradle of Christianity.

Now the percentage of Christians in the total number of the population of Syria is only 4%, the majority of which are the elderly and the infirm. Young people and those in child-bearing age comprise now a critical minority of the country. The state has lost its gene pool. This is a serious crisis for the Christians of Syria.

At the Council in Bari, religious leaders spoke of the need for financial assistance from European states to emigrated Christians so that they could return to their homeland. But the financial aid alone will not be enough, it will have no substantial effect. Syrians who have received citizenship and stability after several years of horror, are unlikely to immediately return back without reliable security guarantees.

This confirms the fact of negotiations that are being held with about 5 thousand Syrian refugees in Iraq in Irbil, mostly Orthodox Christians, who are looking forward to immigrate to Australia and Canada. Although a priest from Damascus held negotiations on their return to Syria, the talks proved to be unsuccessful, because at present Syrians are not confident that their security and livelihood needs would be guaranteed. They still remember how extremists scoffed, humiliated and killed people in Christian villages during the war.

Currently, Christians in Syria are in a very depressed condition. People have no perspective and hope for a change in the situation. People need to have the possibility to work and ensure their safety.

It is a deep crisis, but we must begin with those people that remained. The efforts of international institutions and governments should be aimed at their support, assistance, development of prospects and, above all, guarantee of security. Obviously, the threat to their lives does not come from those Muslims with whom they have peacefully coexisted for hundreds of years, but from extremist-minded Muslims and militants, as well as the ideology they spread.

The international community, as well as the Syrian government, must take the Christians of Syria under their protection as a group of people at risk, who have suffered from violence. And it needs to be done today. The Syrian government, OSCE participating States, international organizations, and religious leaders must persevere in their efforts to save Christians in Syria. We need to launch a broad awareness-raising work and new enlightenment. If the media finally starts talking about the real situation of Christians, and the government finally starts effectively prevent and curb unlawful actions against them, it will mark a huge step forward in terms of changing the situation. The next step could be economic and financial support. I emphasize that if the current situation lasts for another six months, it may become irreversible.

Now it is necessary to establish new effective international regulatory bodies, local public organizations under the patronage of the government of Syria and other states of the region.

Another area of endeavor for international organizations should be searching and returning missing persons. After the military conflict, thousands of people disappeared. Their relatives do not know whether they are still alive. Recently, it has been reported on the alleged whereabouts of two kidnapped Christian bishops. It was stated that negotiations were being held on their release. If the two bishops are finally returned home, it will contribute significantly to the increasing of the degree of public confidence.

It is extremely important to bring to bear the initiatives and capacities of local religious leaders, who have historical experience of a thousand-year-long peaceful coexistence.

In connection with the above, we recommend the OSCE, OSCE participating States, ODIHR, and international organizations to promote the creation of a permanent conference on interreligious dialogue in the Middle East, involving representatives of all religious groups and movements that can influence their followers to achieve a vital agreement on Syria and other regions involved in conflict.

I urge the OSCE participating States, and in particular the countries of the European Union, which have accepted a large influx of refugees, to carefully consider these recommendations and facilitate their early implementation.

Thank you very much for your attention,

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