



Civil Society Actors from the Middle East and Europe meet in Crete

Promoting Peace with Justice

Communiqué

War and terrorism can never be regarded as means of politics. They come into play, when politics and diplomacy have failed and when an ethical orientation got lost. This was one of the commonly shared assumptions of about 35 participants from civil society, national parliaments and diplomats from the Middle East and Europe in view of many ongoing wars, but especially with regard to the present wars in Gaza/Palestine and in the Ukraine.

The consultation took place in Crete as the 10th Consultation in the framework of the “Arab European Citizens’ Dialogue” (AECD), which was launched in 2010. “We assemble representatives from relevant civil society organisations in Europe and in the Middle East, in order to make the voice of civil society to be heard in public and to bring it into dialogue with political decision-makers”, Rev Dr Andrea Zaki, President of CEOSS, one of the biggest faith-based development and cultural organisations in the Middle East said. “Many of our participants have a strong affiliation with their respective religion. They come from different religions and confessions. This is why, not only the role of civil society, but also of religious entities was always very high on the agenda of our process and of our consultations. We regard religious organisations as part of civil society.”

The consultation took place, when the wars in Gaza and Palestine as well as the war in Ukraine dominate the international agenda. “About a good two years ago, we could not have imagined for these wars to erupt again in our regions, but also as civil society, we have to face reality and stand with the many victims produced by these wars,” Dr Alf Linderman from Oikosnet Europe commented the situation.

Both wars in Ukraine as well as in Israel/Palestine have their specific features, origins and root causes, which each need to be examined and addressed in depth. This includes the documentation of war crimes and atrocities. But listening to voices from the region and from analysts, the participants also highlighted some common features: Once wars have started in a complex world, there is no easy and quick solution anymore, no easy negotiation between conflict partners on the same footing. Nobody has the single solution to end these wars. Mechanisms of power, military force, atrocities against civilians seem to reign instead of the respect for human dignity and ethics as well as for human rights, democracy, the rule of law. These were among the items discussed by the participants in Crete. The meeting called upon all parties and their allies to maintain and strengthen all path of communication with the aim to put an end to war and to move towards a peace based on justice.

Religion has the potential to acerbate conflicts and wars, if it allows itself to being used or misused for ideological or nationalistic purposes. The consultation rejected any notion

according to which a war could be just or religiously justified. The calling of religions is to engage with the people on ways towards a “just peace”.

All religions proclaim peace and reconciliation. Many of them have over the years established training programmes for facilitators and mediators and became places for dialogue across religious or national borders. With the Arab-European Citizens’ Dialogue we want to contribute to the positive role of religion in upholding and implementing ethical reflection and in supporting those who offer humanitarian assistance and work for peace and reconciliation in war torn societies. We combat hate speech. We are also worried for the future and want to foster debates on a just peace after war and preventive measures for the future. Such dialogues need the support and resourcing of the political institutions and need to involve civil society as well as religious actors.

The consultation also looked on the role of the media in war and conflict situations. It was recognized that both traditional and new social media play important roles for our understanding of the situation, but that partisan tendencies and/or pure ignorance is frequently represented in this communication. Thus, we need more critical reading of media content, and more space for voices of moderation and reconciliation. This is a challenge for the individual but even more so for education and civil society.

The 10th consultation of the AECD took place in the Orthodox Academy of Crete from 8 to 11 May 2024, in the week after the Orthodox Church in the region celebrated Easter that stands for a new beginning, for hope. The participants of the consultation, representing different religions and different religious traditions, left with a renewed commitment to continue their dialogue and thus trying to contribute to visions for the presence and the future, to hope.

Crete, May 2024

The Coptic Evangelical Organisation for Social Services/CEOSS, www.ceoss-eg.org

The Ecumenical Association of Academies and Laity Centres/Oikosnet Europe, www.oikosnet.eu

The Orthodox Academy of Crete/OAC, www.oac.gr