

Arab Working Group for Muslim-Christian Dialogue

Cairo: July 6, 2004

Press Release

From the 3rd to the 6th of July, 2004, the Arab Working Group for Muslim-Christian Dialogue (AWG) conducted a consultation in Cairo on “The Problematic of Dialogue and Coexistence.” The members gathered to consult on the current state of Muslim-Christian relations in the Arab world, as well as on the relations between the Arab world and the West in light of current very difficult circumstances. The group also discussed its agenda for the foreseeable future. The participants discussed a variety of points that may be summarized as follows:

1. Muslim-Christian Relations in the Arab World

It was recognized that Muslim-Christian relations are strongly affected by both Muslim and Christian images projected by Christian and Muslim public rhetoric. The sources of this rhetoric are various. Some of the rhetoric is based upon solid [sacred] texts. Some of it is shaped by historical vagaries, by social and political circumstances, as well as by external intrusions. Some of it emerges from a meld of both of the above — that is, on the one hand, valid faith principles and values, and, on the other hand, constraining elements in changeful historical circumstances, and the problems and struggles these circumstances precipitate.

Further, in this regard, the emigration of a large number of Arab Christians was discussed. This phenomenon has the potential to undermine the shape of coexistence because it further reduces the political and social role Arab Christians can play as a part of the Arab social, cultural and historical tapestry. Furthermore, it contributes to weakening the element of pluralism in Arab society and everything that the culture of pluralism and openness has to contribute. Beyond recognizing that they were enshrined in the fundamental sources and texts of religion, the participants reaffirmed their conviction that religious freedom, human rights and the understanding of citizenship are all prerequisites for coexistence.

2. Muslim-Christian Relations — the Arab World and the West

Discussion touched upon the state of Muslim-Christian relations in both Europe and the United States, and how they contrast. While Europe’s understanding of issues like those concerning Palestine and Iraq is better, its posture is far less open with regard to Islamic groups within its borders. By contrast, while American political positions are hostile to the Arab world, pressure on its Muslim community is comparatively less than in Europe. Thus, the contorted relations between the West and both Muslim and Christian Arabs require a deep understanding of the existing ambiguities. Furthermore, Arabs must counter the negative images painted of them in the West. They must participate structurally and energetically in re-shaping their image and in educating those responsible in the West concerning Arabs and Arab culture. Otherwise we will be obliged to deal with the West as a self-consistent and united entity.

3. Problematics of Dialogue and Co-existence — Choices and Models

Participants in the consultation listened to interventions depicting the Lebanese experience, especially the South, and the conditions in Palestine and The Sudan. In order to forestall expanding the negative impact upon Arab Muslim-Christian relations that interfering foreign forces are having, it was deemed necessary for both Muslims and Christians to reaffirm their commitment to human rights. The understanding of these things must be phrased so that people, whatever their station, understand them as being rooted in their religion. Religion must not be

used to contradict its higher intentions to protect people's rights and promote the principles of justice and mercy. Religion, properly understood, supports both law and ethics. Furthermore, the participants applauded the movement toward peace in The Sudan. They insisted that the problem of Darfur must be solved internally without the interference of external forces that pursue their special interests.

In Palestine there is evidence of real internal solidarity between Muslims and Christians, a stable model based upon common concerns. The realities of occupation, however, create circumstances that threaten to undermine this solidarity. Furthermore, Christian Zionists in the United States have been working in Palestine to isolate Christians from their Muslim brothers and sisters and from their common patriotic cause. Even though these efforts have failed to achieve anything substantial, they must still be kept in mind so as to block their access. There is clear evidence of the role being played by a number of civic groups in Palestine, strengthening national unity among all the constituent parts of the Palestinian people. This is a role that merits respect, support and cooperation.

4. Arab Circumstances

Participants discussed external factors bearing upon Palestine and The Sudan.

A detailed picture was sketched of the difficult circumstances being endured by the Palestinian people as a result of the current policy of apartheid partition that breaks up half of the best land in the West Bank. The process toward completely Judaizing Jerusalem proceeds. The participants held up the sacrifices the Palestinian people have made in the suffocating circumstances, and affirmed the need for more effort to marshal public opinion in the cause of Palestine generally and of Jerusalem in particular. From the outset the AWG has considered Jerusalem to be the pivotal issue that holds it together. It must be the springboard for the group's work.

The situation in The Sudan, for its part, was realistically sketched out. Present momentum toward capping the springs of unrest there and creating practical conditions for realizing the country's unity and regional security must be encouraged so as to forestall the interference of outside parties in The Sudan's internal affairs. There was a description of the efforts of civic organizations working to this end.

5. Reform and Democracy in the Arab World

This is a crucial and significant issue. An in-depth discussion took place dealing with the political, social, legal and religious dimensions of democracy. Discussed also were the stumbling blocks that have been put in the path of democratization by the meddlesome interference of outside forces pursuing their own agendas. Note must be made of these stumbling blocks. They must not become an excuse for silencing the demand for democracy and reform. Not only is it fundamentally an internal Arab demand, but it is also a prerequisite for neutralizing the machinations of foreign domination. A self-referential and internal initiative on a wide front must be launched, therefore, for realizing this goal based upon internal conditions and the Arab people's *own* agenda. It must be rooted in the religious message of Islam and Christianity on the basis of an enlightened understanding of the legitimate religious sources and objectives that affirm values of justice, freedom, political participation, equality, accountability, the periodic changing of governmental administration, the nation's accountability for itself, and an inclusive understanding of citizenship. In this respect it is essential that the artificially imposed ambiguities be transcended. These put Arab society between the intrusions of foreign forces that purport to be spreading democracy and universal human rights, on the one hand, and, on the other, local regimes that strip the Arab individual of his civil and democratic rights on the excuse of maintaining cultural distinctiveness or on the bogus claim that the demand for democracy and reform is itself a manifestation of external imperialistic interference. Reform and democracy are

two essential resources for resisting both internal oppression and foreign domination. In their very essence they stand to counteract and cancel out foreign imperial interests most especially if they are 'home grown' and are liberated from the anxiety of foreign pressure. Furthermore, the definition of democracy must encompass international relations. The domination of any world power that considers itself above international decisions stands in direct contradiction to the very principle of democracy.

6. Special Session to Evaluate the Work of the Arab Working Group

In this session the activities and efforts of the AWG since its founding were summarized beginning with its objectives, goals and policy directions. Several proposals were framed for developing the work of the group, supporting its efforts, and expanding its impact upon civil society broadly understood and its institutions. Among these suggestions were the following:

- The significance of the role of the AWG was affirmed especially following its foundation on an independent footing. The incorporation of new members, especially young people, was welcomed. There was a call to recruit new members from other Arab countries like Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Iraq.
- There was a call to give wider circulation to the "Muslim-Christian Covenant for Coexistence" so that it might become a reference for Muslim-Christian dialogue on a broader scale. It can be adapted to become a training program for broad segments of society, most especially among youth.
- It was proposed that a periodical magazine be launched dealing with the issues of Muslim-Christian dialogue. It would publish papers delivered in the course of consultations and conferences organized by the AWG as well as materials from other venues for dialogue.

It is worth noting that, in its closing session, the group visited with the minister Ghâzî al-'Uraydî who was at the Arab University in Cairo to discuss issues related to the Frankfurt Exhibition with members of the group, and to dialogue with them concerning the issues of coexistence. The minister praised the work of the group, its uniqueness, and the need for it especially given the current circumstances through which the Arab world is passing.

The Arab Working Group for Muslim-Christian Dialogue
The General Secretariat