

International Conference on the Question of Jerusalem

The Question of Jerusalem after 50 years of Occupation and 25 years of Oslo Accords

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It's an honour to address this international conference on the question of Jerusalem in Rabat. I am representing the general secretary of the World Council of Churches, Reverend Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit, sends you his greetings. The World Council of Churches represents 350 churches and their believers amount to 550 million people in the world.

I myself am an Arab Palestinian Christian Evangelical Lutheran and a Palestinian refugee. However, we Arab Palestinian Christians do not consider ourselves minorities but an integral part of the fabric of our society. The Heads of Churches in Jerusalem that represent Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Catholics, Lutherans and Anglicans have written two position papers on Jerusalem. The first one was in 1994 and the second one was in 2006. Both of them has the same line of position. The position of Heads of Churches in Jerusalem, was fully adopted by the World Council of Churches and the Christian World Communions such as the Lutheran World Federation.

"In this city Jerusalem, in which God chose to speak to humanity and reconcile people with Himself and among themselves, we raise our voices to say that the paths, followed up till now, have not brought about the pacification of the city and have not assured normal life for her inhabitants. Therefore, they must be changed. The political leaders must search for a vision as well as for new means". (Status of Jerusalem, 2006). *"The future of the city must be decided by common agreement through collaboration and consultation and not imposed by power and force. Unilateral decisions or imposed solutions will continue to be very detrimental to peace and security. this is the reason that international legitimacy on Jerusalem must be fully respected and implemented".*

The Churches in Jerusalem, World Council of Churches and Global Confession Communions refuse any kind of apocalyptic, eschatological or biblicistic scenarios that the so called Evangelical groups are promoting around the world. These Evangelistic groups do not represent the churches in the Middle East nor the vast majority of Christians in the world. For we believe that the conflict on Jerusalem is political and needs a political solution. The Heads of Churches in Jerusalem wrote a letter on December 6th, 2017, opposing the move of the Embassy. In their letter to President Donal J. Trump, President of the United States of America, they wrote: *"Our land is called to be a land of peace. Jerusalem, the city of God, is the city of peace for us and for the world. Unfortunately, though, our Holy Land with Jerusalem the Holy City, is today a land of conflict..."*.

"Mr. President, we have been following, with concern, the reports about the possibility of changing how the United States understands and deals with the status of Jerusalem. We are certain that such steps will yield increased hatred, conflict, violence and suffering in Jerusalem and the Holy Land. Moving us farther from the goal of unity and deeper toward destructive division. We ask from you Mr. President to help us all walk towards more love and a definitive peace, which can not be reached without Jerusalem being for all.

Our solemn advice and plea is for the United States to continue recognising the present international status of Jerusalem. Any sudden changes would cause irreparable harm. We are confident that with strong support from our friends, Israelis and Palestinians can work towards negotiating a sustainable and just peace, benefiting all who long for the Holy City of Jerusalem to fulfil its destiny. The Holy City can be shared and fully enjoyed once a political process helps liberate the hearts of all people, that live within it from the conditions of conflict and destructiveness that they are experiencing".

Lasting peace in the Middle East is contingent upon the birth of peaceful coexistence between peoples in Jerusalem, the Holy City, the heritage of humanity, now a city of two peoples namely Palestinians and Israelis and three religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The best solution is for Jerusalem to be shared by two sovereign countries—Palestine and Israel—and the three religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Jerusalem can and should be capitol to both nations. Jerusalem has a unique character that distinguishes it from all the other cities of the world; a character which surpasses any local political sovereignty. As the Patriarchs and Heads of Churches said together in 1994, *"Jerusalem is too precious to be dependent solely on municipal or national political authorities."*

Jerusalem's two peoples are the guardians of her sanctity and carry a double responsibility: to organise their lives in the city and to welcome all the "pilgrims" who come from around the world. The needed international collaboration is not meant to replace the role and the sovereignty of her two peoples. It is rather needed in order to help both peoples to reach the definition and the stability of the special status of the city. That is why, concretely, and from the political, economic and social point of view, her two peoples must bestow on Jerusalem a special status that corresponds to her double character, holy and universal, and ordinary and local, where daily life unfolds. Once this status has been found and defined, the international community is required to confirm it with international guaranties that will assure continuing peace and respect for all.

The components of this special status must include the following elements:

- a. The human right of freedom of worship and of conscience for all, both as individuals and as religious communities.
- b. Equality of all her inhabitants before the law, in coordination with international resolutions.
- c. Free access to Jerusalem for all—citizens, residents or pilgrims—at all times, whether in peace or in war. In this way, Jerusalem should be an open city.

When the Churches last February felt the the historic status quo was challenged in imposing taxes on Churches, they unanimously decided to protest by closing the doors of the Holy Sepulchre Church.

This is the reason Churches in Jerusalem believe that:

1. Jerusalem must be a shared city for Jews, Christians, and Muslims, Palestinians and Israeli alike;
2. The historical status quo must be maintained and respected;
3. The custodianship of Christian and Muslim Holy Places must continue to be under the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, King Abdullah II ibn Hussain.

Since 1994, the heads of the local churches have proclaimed that the *"rights of property ownership, custody and worship which the different Churches have acquired throughout history should continue to be retained by the same communities. These rights which are already protected in the Status Quo of the Holy Places according to historical 'firmans' and other documents, should continue to be recognised and respected."* Today, it is important to add that any final status agreement regarding Jerusalem must ensure that all Christian holy places are united within a single political geography.

For Jews, Christians and Muslims, Jerusalem is a high place of revelation and of God's encounter with humanity. That is why I cannot remain indifferent to her fate nor remain silent in the face of her sufferings. *"For Jerusalem's sake I will not rest until her vindication shines out like the dawn and her salvation like a burning torch"* (Is 62:1).

Peace in the city of Jerusalem cannot come from one party alone. Muslims, Christians, and Jews must collaborate toward an agreement based on mutual respect and open dialogue. A peace that is imposed on people at gunpoint is no peace at all, but merely a charade. A city divided by walls of concrete and fear cannot possibly be called a united city. Sovereignty over the city can and should be shared, with equal access to both Palestinians and Israelis. Two separate sovereignties for two distinct peoples is also a possibility, so long as these peoples share equal regard for the dignity of the other in order to reach a true unity of hearts in the two parts of the city. *"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem..."* (Psalm 122:6a).

If there is to be peace based on justice in the Middle East, it will start in Jerusalem and spread to the farthest reaches of the Holy Land and beyond. There will not be peace in the Middle East without peace in Jerusalem. We Religious leaders cannot bring peace based on justice in the Middle East but peace based on justice cannot succeed without us religious leaders. Please pray and work for justice and reconciliation in Jerusalem and for Jerusalem.

May God bless you,