

## Office of the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process

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“Beyond freedom of religion or belief: guaranteeing the rights of religious minorities”

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*Check against Delivery*

### **Inter-religious dialogue and the Cyprus peace process**

*Salpy Eskidjian*

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honored to be at this esteemed forum to share our experiences from Cyprus working on religious freedom and inter-religious dialogue.

When we started looking at the role of religion in the Cyprus conflict, it was shocking to find out that there was total absence of communication between the religious leaders of the two communities for over 5 decades. Even worse was to note its negative impact on human rights, peace and reconciliation.

No one, willing to invest time or money, believed that religion could play a positive role in the conflict even in Cyprus. Religion was labelled as conservative, obstructionist, nationalist and ended up as the “unpopular minority” on the peace block.

We appreciate the recommendations of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief in his mission report where he stressed that projects which may contribute to improving the relations between different religious communities should be further strengthened.

In this regard I want to express my sincere appreciation to the Swedish Ambassadors in Cyprus, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sweden and the current President and Board of the Religious Social Democrats of Sweden (Tro och Solidaritet) and initially also the Peace Research Institute of Oslo (PRIO) for believing in the need for inter-religious communication for human rights and peace in Cyprus and their active support in our efforts. Without them and in particular the religious leaders HB

Archbishop Chrysostomos II and HE Grand Mufti Dr Atalay as well as some key aides the religious track would not have been what it is today. Furthermore, the collaboration with Special Rapporteur Heiner Bielefeldt and staff members at OHCHR was key in improving the climate of inter-religious communication in Cyprus, which has already yielded concrete positive results on the ground.

The purpose of the Religious Track has been to build relationship, understanding and trust between the religious leaders and ultimately the members of the respective faith communities, including clergy. So far the religious track has been working with the religious leaders mainly of the two communities with a prospect to focus on youth and women and the grassroots.

While the Cyprus conflict is not a religious one, you can see that religion is one of the victims of this protracted conflict of nearly five decades.

Religion is not only a victim but it also plays an active and significant role in the political and social life of the island.

As the Special Rapporteur rightly observed the political positions taken by the high ranking religious representatives, in particular the head of the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus and the Turkish Sunni Muslim Mufti has enormous influence on the development of the relationship between the two official ethnic communities. One example is the role the Church of Cyprus played in 2004 when they instructed the Greek Cypriots to vote against the Annan Plan, a UN brokered proposal for peace.

Post referendum studies of the Cyprus conflict, undertaken by PRIO (2007), had shown that religious believers on both sides, compared to non-religious people, have more intense feelings about violence in the past, are less positive to opening of borders, have fewer encounters with people from the other side and hence have more resistance to reconciliation.

The total absence of any investments to initiate, establish and strengthen inter-religious communication until the Swedish initiative in 2009 is a key aspect of why religious believers compared to non-religious ones have not contributed positively to peace, forgiveness and reconciliation.

As a very quiet, almost secret peacebuilding process, the religious track was rather unknown until recently. The religious leaders needed the space to develop a relationship away from obstacles that would try to destroy such an effort before it even started. They agreed that they would go public if and when they had something concrete and positive to report and they did that.

When religious leaders are trapped in the nationalist agenda of their respective communities, they cannot contribute or help each other. However, when the come

together and support each other on the principle ground of rights, based on Freedom of Religion or Belief, and their claims are in line with Human Rights law, no government can stop them, only make delays.

Together with the leaders we are exploring ways religious leaders can offer constructive contributions to the Cyprus peace process in particular to the complex process of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Through the religious track the religious leaders together are trying to ensure that the main concerns of the religious communities, e.g. cultural heritage, religious freedom, right to worship, religious property rights are understood and considered in the Cyprus peace process and formal negotiations.

### Concluding Remarks

Today there is inter-religious communication in Cyprus. Yes, on the level of leadership and still in its infancy maybe even fragile at times, but it does exist. There is no turning back.

The Swedish initiative managed to bring together the religious leaders of Cyprus demonstrating a new dynamic in the Cyprus peace process with solid commitment. It has not only established and improved the relationship between the main religious leaders but most important it started to change the negative stereotypes.

Archbishop Chrysostomos II and Grand Mufti Atalay are courageously taking small, sometimes symbolic but solid steps, to reach out and compromise, to empathise and try to overcome decades of division and mistrust. They are joined by the Maronite Catholic and Armenian Orthodox religious leaders.

The religious leaders of Cyprus agree together that it is unacceptable for places of worship to be vandalized, looted or left to perish as a result of intentional neglect.

They agree that all believers should have full access to their places of worship, have the right to pray there as prescribed by each religion. The religious leaders find restrictions, control or banning clerics to conduct worship unacceptable.

Last month we had a breakthrough for religious freedom in the island when due to an agreement that Archbishop Chrysostomos II and the Grand Mufti had made, the political leadership of the island agreed to lift the 18 month travel ban and 4 year ban to conduct worship of the Bishop Christoforos of Karpassia. In return the Grand Mufti, was allowed to cross the green line for the first time ever acknowledging his function as Mufti of Cyprus, allowing him the freedom to pray and the opportunity to be able to oversee the mosques all over the island.

The Religious track has proved that when there is an improved climate of inter-religious dialogue and it is based on internationally acceptable norms and values then trust can be built and significant progress on the ground can be made.

The religious leaders have demonstrated that even if the island is politically divided, they will not allow religion to be divided.

The Religious track has proved that religious leaders in a conflict situation can play a positive role in addressing violations of human rights, promoting peace and reconciliation. They bring hope to many.

Thank you for your attention.