

## **Russia conquering the hearts and minds of Christians in the Middle East?**

***Lavrov: The European Union avoids the discussion on the problems of Christians in the Middle East, putting itself under the infamous mask of 'political correctness'***

HRWF (28.01.2017) - Speaking at the 25th edition of the International Christmas Education, being held in Kremlin, Foreign minister of Russia Sergey Lavrov made reference to the alarm and concern caused in the Middle East also from "cruel suffering" and the "deliberate destruction" inflicted on the Christian communities in the region. "Unfortunately - added Lavrov - the European Union avoids the discussion on the problems of Christians in the Middle East, putting itself under the infamous mask of 'political correctness'."

Lavrov voiced concerns over "cruel harassment and well-targeted killing of the Christian population in the Middle East and the destruction of the world heritage sites."

Russia and its partners hold annual events devoted to protecting Christians in the framework of the UN Human Rights Council, he said.

At least 100 places of worship have been vandalized or completely demolished in the territories of Mosul and Nineveh Province since June 2014, when the jihadists of the Islamic State (Daesh) imposed their rule in that region. This is what Mariwan Naqshbandi, spokesman for the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Autonomous Region of Iraqi Kurdistan reports, anticipating the contents of a report to be published by the Commission on crimes committed by militiamen of Daesh in Mosul and in the Nineveh Plain when they had control of that area.

In the document - said the Kurdish spokesman, according to local sources consulted by Agenzia Fides - it is highlighted that most of the destroyed or damaged religious sites are Christian churches, along with a number of Yazidi temples or belonging to other religious minorities. The Commission on crimes committed by Daesh - added Mariwan Naqshbandi - collects information thanks to the contribution of the Kurdish Peshmerga troops that contribute to the liberation war against the Islamic State, and is committed to also collecting data on violence against women - especially yazide - during the jihadist occupation.

***Patriarch of Moscow Kirill invited in Syria***

Agenzia Fides (14.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2lvp5Xl> - Scholars and official representatives of Syrian Islam, together with the Syrian Ministry officials for endowments and religious affairs (waqf), sent an invitation to the Patriarch of Moscow Kirill to visit the country. The news was given by the Russian media, reporting that the invitation was sent to the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church through the Mufti of Moscow Albir Krganov, who recently led the visit to Syria of a Russian Islamic delegation. In the program of a possible trip to Syria Patriarch Kirill - added Krganov, who is also a member of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation, an institution aimed at "protecting the rights and freedoms of citizens" and to encourage the growth of Russian civil society - would certainly include a visit to Maalula, a Christian village where people still speak Aramaic, occupied twice by the jihadi militias of al Nusra Front between 2013 and 2014.

The Russian Islamic representative also reported that the creation of an interfaith Foundation under the aegis of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation, to be used as a tool to convey humanitarian aid in Syria, is being studied.

The Patriarchate of Moscow continues to strengthen its ties with the Orthodox Churches of the Middle East, also giving its material resources. Already in August 2013 the donation of one million and 300 thousand dollars arrived from the Russian Orthodox Church to the Patriarchate of Antioch in order to help the people overwhelmed by the conflict.

Patriarch Kirill, also accompanied by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, had already been received by President Assad in Damascus on November 13, 2011, when the revolt of the opposition groups had begun a few months before. During that meeting, Assad had praised Syria as "an example of peaceful coexistence of different religious communities". (GV) (Agenzia Fides 14/01/2017)

### ***Iraqi Christians reduced to self-help and self-financing? (\*)***

Agenzia Fides (27.01.2017) - On January 26, a delegation of the Chaldean Church led by Patriarch Raphael Louis Sako I visited the area of the Nineveh Plain recently reconquered by the government army, also welcomed by local political representatives. In Telkaif, in the church of the Sacred Heart, the Chaldean Patriarch led a moment of prayer to invoke the gift of peace in the entire region and the prompt return of refugees to their homes.

The Chaldean Patriarchate reports that committees have been set up and the first funds have been allocated - by the Chaldean Patriarchate and individual dioceses in Iraq - for a total of nearly 500 million Iraqi dinars (equivalent to more than 380 thousand euro), in order to accelerate the recovery of homes and churches damaged or destroyed during the years of jihad occupation, and therefore allow the return of those who wish to return to their homes, abandoned between June and August 2014 before the advancing of the self-proclaimed Islamic Caliphate militia.

The message issued yesterday by the media of the Patriarchate, appeals to the generosity of parishes and Chaldean communities scattered around the world to take charge of the financial support for the reconstruction and reinstatement projects of the living conditions in the liberated cities of the Nineveh Plain. According to data provided by the Patriarchate, and sent to Agenzia Fides, the first reconnaissance showed that Batnaya is the most devastated town during the jihadi occupation, and then during the fighting that led to the expulsion of the caliphate militias. Other cities, such as Tesqopa and the same Telkaif, suffered less damage.

In Telkaif (see Fides 25/01/2017) government troops, when they regained control of the city, found a 60-year-old Christian woman, Georgette Hanna, who in August 2014 was not able to escape along with the other members of her family, and since then had found refuge with a family of Muslim neighbors, who took care of her. (GV) (Agenzia Fides 27/01/2017)

(\*) The title is from Human Rights Without Frontiers