

Muslims defend Christians' freedom in Beirut Declaration



Beirut (AsiaNews, 25 August 2015) – *Makassed*, a Sunni philanthropic association close to Dar el-Fatwa, Lebanon's highest Sunni authority, has issued a statement, the 'Beirut Declaration on Religious Freedom,' dated 20 June. In its declaration, the Sunni association reiterates liberal Islam's desire to live alongside Christians, noting that no one can be forced to convert or be persecuted for holding beliefs different from one's own. Indeed, for the group, Islam bans war against those who are different, and forbids expelling them from their land or limiting their freedom in the name of religion.

Such a pronouncement is meant to stake out a clear position for Lebanon's Muslims against the violence carried out in the name of their religion. In it, the basic teachings of Islam are laid out against those who hold the faith hostage for the sake of power.

The full text of the Declaration - translated by AsiaNews.

The Beirut Declaration on Religious Freedom

Lebanon, other Arab countries and Muslims are now in turmoil because of religion, sectarianism and confessionalism. People are being killed, forced out of their homes and deprived of their dignity.

In this abnormal situation, religion is exploited for political reasons, with people, countries and civilisations sacrificed in vain. This is leading to the rise of Islamophobia in various parts of the world. Coexistence and the values inherited from our civilisation, as well as the future of our young people, are seriously threatened. Many Arab and Islamic initiatives have tried to find a way out, or even counter the situation, so as to correct it and reject the violence perpetrated in the name of religion.

The Makassed Philanthropic Islamic Association of Beirut, which favours educational, Islamic and national values, supports and promotes the culture of tolerance and reason (enlightenment). It views itself as responsible for building a society where people can live together in freedom, in a civil society based on progress that can face the dangers that threaten the nation and its people, as well as its moral and religious values.

As an Arab and national organisation, Makassed is called to oppose extremism and violence. For this reason, it is issuing the Beirut Declaration on Religious Freedoms, by which it reiterates religious freedoms and traditional values, which are the enlightened values of Beirut and Lebanon, to safeguard the dignity of every citizen and human being. Therefore, Makassed hopes to save and protect religion from those who attempt to hold it hostage with false slogans.

1. Freedom of religion, worship and education

Religious faith is a free choice and obligation. It is every person's right. The Holy Qur'an unequivocally protects this right when he says, "There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong" (*Surat Al-Baqarah - The Cow*, 2:256).*

In another verse, it goes on to state, "So remind, [O Muhammad]; you are only a reminder. You are not over them a controller" (*Surat Al-Ghāshiyah - The Overwhelming*, 88:21-22).

For more than 13 centuries, our country has seen mosques, churches and [other] places of worship built side by side. We want this legacy of freedom, cooperation and shared life to remain deeply embedded in our land, in our cities and among our young people. Our religion and national traditions, our alliances and our laws compel us to adhere firmly to these principles.

To deny Christian communities the right to exercise their religious freedom and destroy their churches, monasteries and educational and social institutions are contrary to Islam's teachings, and are, since these abuses are made in its name, a blatant violation of its principles.

Therefore, we proclaim, from an Islamic, humanitarian and national perspective, that we are absolutely opposed to these destructive acts and we call on our fellow Christians to resist the acts of terror that seek to drive them from their land. We urge them to stay deeply attached and rooted in these lands, along with their Muslim brothers, enjoying with them the same rights and duties. This will allow them, along with their Muslim compatriots, to safeguard our common values and life in multi-religious and all-encompassing communities.

Our shared heritage, as believers in God, requires us to reject compulsion in matter of faith, respect intellectual freedom and accept differences between people as an expression of God's will. Only God can judge men wherever they differ.

2. The right to dignity

This right is found in the Qur'ānic text. The Holy Qur'an says, "And We have certainly honoured the children of Adam and carried them on the land and sea and provided for them of the good things and preferred them over much of what We have created, " (*Surat Al-'Isrā' - The Night Journey*, 17:70).

Therefore, man is endowed with dignity as a human being. The foundation of his dignity is the fact that he has been endowed with reason, freedom of belief, opinion and expression. He is directly responsible before God for the exercise of his freedom. It is a human right to enjoy his freedom under the protection of the government; no one has the right to judge people for their faith or persecute and discriminate against them on religious or ethnic grounds.

God Almighty says, "do not say to one who gives you [a greeting of] peace "You are not a believer," aspiring for the goods of worldly life" (*Surat An-Nisā' - The Women*, 4:94).

"All mankind is the progeny of Adam," said the Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be upon Him) in the last sermon. Likewise, he said, "all human beings are equal."

The Holy Qur'an recognises only two reasons for a defensive war: religious persecution and expulsion from one's land. The Holy Qur'ān says, "Allah does not forbid you from those who do not fight you because of religion and do not expel you from your homes - from being righteous toward them and acting justly toward them. Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly" (*Surat Al-Mumtahānah - She that is to be examined*, 60: 8).

In the eyes of the Qur'ān, no one has the right to wage war against someone because of his beliefs or against a people or a community to drive them from their homes, or deprive them of their land. It is therefore our duty to unite our efforts to protect religious and national freedoms, and respect human dignity and protect coexistence on the basis of justice and love.

3. The right to be different, the right to plurality

God upheld the right to be different when he says, " O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you"(*Surat Al-Ĥujurāt - The Rooms*, 49:13).

The differences between societies and their plurality, and the individual and communal freedom between societies and groups are a natural phenomenon. To know and recognise one another is a divine command. Never have human societies been one or the same in their attitude and their way of life, or even in their religious beliefs.

4. The right to participate in political and public life

The right to participate in political and public life is founded on the principles of equality, freedom of choice and individual responsibility. Islam, as the Al-Azhar statement said, does not impose a specific political regime nor does it endorse a religious state. Political systems, in any society, are the creation of the people in that society, be they Muslims and non-Muslims. Based on the shared consent of citizens, a people can choose its own system of government, and can change it according to their free will on the basis of their best interests. Therefore, to consider a specific political system as sacred or infallible, or as a matter for religion, is a misunderstanding of religion and an imposition on people, both Muslims and non-Muslims. All persons are protected by the national state that they have created together, on the basis of respect for the Constitution and the laws that consider them equal in rights and duties.

5. Our commitment to Arab and international alliances

Arab culture has had a glorious and pluralistic civilisation that has contributed to world progress. It has created states and systems of government and institutions. Religion has never been an obstacle to such goals. If we now turn against this culture in the name of religion, we betray the great legacy of the past and our constant struggle for progress and security. We are committed to supporting the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and subsequent Arab declarations. The last of these is al-Azhar's statement on fundamental freedoms.

We are part of this world, and aspire to have a positive share in its progress. We do not fear the rest of the world and we do not want to be a source of fear for others. We do not want to isolate ourselves from the rest of the world and we do not want the world to isolate itself from us. Let us not forget that Muslims constitute one-fifth of the world population, and a third of them live in non-Muslim countries.

6. We are committed to Lebanon as a homeland and a united democratic state

Based on the values of freedom, freedom of association and shared social life, the Lebanese form of state has created a consensus-based system, which guarantees basic freedoms and has led to a flourishing state. Of course, we acknowledge that the Lebanese system of government suffers from major problems, but this system remains open to improvements, to the extent that political and religious freedoms are guaranteed and the will of the people is safeguarded. Lebanon's Muslim thinkers and intellectuals, many of whom are Makassed graduates, contributed to this culture of freedom and liberal Islamic thought. They joined other Lebanese intellectuals in establishing the National Alliance, achieving the Taif accords and formulating the Ten principles that Dar Al Fatwa proclaimed in 1983. The latter states the principles of common citizenship, civil government, civil liberties and loyalty to Lebanon as a sovereign state and homeland for all its citizens. We want Lebanon to remain united and democratic, protector of the rights and freedoms of all citizens and a model of plural and free society. Lebanon will be an example to follow for all the Arab regimes who are deeply suffering because of extremism, intolerance and crimes committed in the name of religion, which force people out of their homes, ignoring the principles of coexistence and human dignity. The Lebanese model is one of tolerance, non-violence and humanism.

7. Makassed's role and commitment

Makassed shall remain faithful to its mission and principles as defined 137 years ago. It is committed to freedom of education and the teaching of religious tolerance. Makassed taught Islam to many generations via renowned teachers from Lebanon and other Arab countries.

We shall revive this tradition, and we shall reform the teachings of Islam in close collaboration with Dar Al Fatwa. We shall benefit from the latest innovations and methods in civic education. Makassed has always been a beacon of tolerance in civic and religious education. God willing, we shall remain so.

Beirut was "the Mother of the laws" and a home for freedom and creativity. Since it participated in the creation of the modern state and the progress of freedom, it strives to remain that way, together with Muslims, non-Muslims, the Makassed, in these difficult times for Arabs and Lebanon. Beirut shall remain the beacon of Muslim enlightenment, Arab progress and humanitarian peace.

Long live Beirut, long live Makassed, long live Lebanon!