

Brussels, 20<sup>th</sup> February 2019

### Visit of Jan Figel to Israel and Palestine, 12<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>h</sup> of February 2019

Jan Figel, Special Envoy for the Promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the EU, was in Jerusalem, Nazareth and the Mount Tabor, Ramallah and Bethlehem and visited the the Baha'i International Centre in Haifa. The mission was constructive and generated interesting contacts (see programme in annex). Together with [REDACTED] in Tel Aviv, he met representatives of the MFA of Israel - including [REDACTED], [REDACTED] of the Bureau of World Jewish Affairs and World Religions and [REDACTED], [REDACTED] for European Affairs. The meeting with [REDACTED] Minister on European Affairs of the Palestinian MFA, [REDACTED], was constructive, she informed that the PA would welcome the Pope to call an interfaith initiative on Jerusalem. Both sides noted that religion is more and more present in politics - "explosive mix"- and firmly expressed interest to see an EU engagement in this area.

The visit was warmly received by Jewish, Muslim, and Christian religious leaders and influential figures. [REDACTED] Rabbi [REDACTED] welcomed the SE very warmly and invited him to join the next meeting of the Council of Religious Community Leaders. Promising contact were made with Rabbi [REDACTED] and the "Religious Peace Initiative", supporting innovative work in the area of interreligious cooperation, building trust and working with extremist groups on both sides.

[REDACTED] Imam [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], [REDACTED] of Waqf, [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

Many interlocutors from both sides voiced serious concerns around the Basic Law on Jewish Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People, described as "racist and deeply discriminatory". All agreed that religious actors "could do more" for FoRB, for interreligious cohabitation and for peace. Issa Kassissieh, Palestinian Ambassador to the Holy See, [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

FoRB seems to be in relatively good shape in Israel, the MFA [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

Christian minority in Palestine has been traditionally well integrated in society and in politics and positively discriminated by the Authorities. However, trends around freedom of religion in Palestine are not all rosy. Similarly to other Arab countries, FoRB in Palestine is essentially freedom to worship. Conversions are only accepted for Christian women converting to Islam, interreligious marriages are rare and contested. Palestinian "senior" voices argue that Christian and Muslim continue to "share life" peacefully ("we are Palestinian first"). But all "younger" interlocutors and other voices see prejudices and divisions growing. There is fear and anxiety about the "other". Christians represent today only 0.8% of the population and the islamisation of society is inevitable. The big question is which type of Islam will prevail. Many voices noted that "global fanaticism" blows across Christians and Muslims also in Palestine. Christian schools and other social institutions are seen by all as key protectors of pluralism and integration. Many also noted that radicalisation is fuelled by recent regional developments including western interventions.

The recent Declaration of the Pope and Grand Imam Al Tayeb in the Emirates raises hope and is seen as very relevant.

All in all, with the development of religious Zionism, political Islam in Gaza, and the weight of American evangelicals, religious motivations play an increasing role in the conflict. All interlocutors agreed that this dimension - traditionally excluded from reflections and peace discussions– deserves attention and an open and constructive dialogue.

J. Figel thanks colleagues in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem for the very good cooperation. Details on selected meetings will be integrated in the full report.

Noted by [REDACTED], [REDACTED] of Jan Figel