



**PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY OF THE MEDITERRANEAN**  
**ASSEMBLEE PARLEMENTAIRE DE LA MEDITERRANEE**  
الجمعية البرلمانية للبحر الأبيض المتوسط

**3<sup>rd</sup> Standing Committee**  
**on Dialogue among Civilisations and Human Rights**

Special Task Force on Religious Freedom and Dialogue of Cultures

**Rapporteur: Sónia Sanfona (Portugal)**

*Report on Religious Freedom and Dialogue of Cultures [endorsed by consensus by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Standing Committee at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Session of the Standing Committees, 19 September 2008, St. Julians (Malta)]*

**1. The Mediterranean area as a plural area and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM) as a vehicle for intercultural dialogue**

Intercultural and inter-religious dialogue are essential for the peoples of the Mediterranean States to live peaceably beside one another. Since the dawn of civilization, the Mediterranean has been home to a large number of diverse cultures and religions. The interchange of experiences and contact between these civilizations and religions, albeit not always peaceful, has contributed to the Mediterranean region's specificity. The PAM is an institution that brings together the national parliaments of the Mediterranean States, which is why it is in a privileged position to act as a vehicle for intercultural dialogue, whilst respecting and encouraging the Mediterranean peoples' long tradition of pluralism and diversity.

## **2. The Mediterranean as a region for cultural and religious dialogue**

The inevitable consequence of such a wealth of cultural and religious diversity is the acknowledgment of the individual right to religious freedom – owed by each State to the individuals living there. However, this also requires mutual acceptance of State sovereignty with respect to its own religious beliefs, which also includes the right of each State to choose to be secular or denominational (provided individual freedom of religion is guaranteed). It is also necessary to include group freedoms within this consideration, that is: the religious identity of groups of people, especially minorities.

## **3. Mutual awareness as a priority strategy for strengthening relations between the Mediterranean States and peoples**

The history of the relationships between the different States, peoples and cultures of the Mediterranean has often been conflictual. This state of conflict has in recent times undoubtedly been exacerbated by the lack of reciprocal knowledge of the different cultures and religions. Furthermore, religion has often been cited to conceal and fuel conflicts which owe their origins to political and economic ambitions. Building up a dialogue-based culture, and especially an inter-religious dialogue, could be founded on a wide-ranging in-depth understanding of one another. In this context, the PAM's first step should be to further inter-religious and intercultural dialogue, a commitment which entails developing and deepening awareness of the numerous cultures and religions that form Mediterranean identity.

## **4. A first step towards mutual awareness: a report on the national policies and experiences of the PAM States with regard to promoting dialogue and understanding**

In view of the serious and profound ignorance of each others' religions and cultures, we propose that our Special Task Force, working within the framework of the Third Standing Committee, should continue its work by gathering from PAM members their policies and practices to contrast this ignorance and contribute to the promotion of tolerance and respect for religious and cultural diversity. This information will be prepared in the form of a report, the object of which will be to share knowledge of existing and forthcoming legislation and policies, best practices and lessons learnt. On the basis of this essentially empirical data, the different States will be able to gain a better understanding of national and regional approaches to the issue. Following from this, it will be possible for PAM States to promote external and internal intercultural and inter-religious dialogue.

### **5. The guiding principles underlying the preparation of the report**

This report will comply with two guiding principles: neutrality and completeness.

Firstly, it must be governed by the principle of neutrality. Given that the objectives of the report are simply to share information, the report must not give any value judgements or make any comments on the situation in each State. It must be limited to gathering, and consolidating the information received from PAM members.

Secondly it must be governed by the principle of completeness. Basically, two types of information will be gathered: part will be based on experiences and practices; and the other part will be legal and policy-based.

These two types of information are complementary and will provide a useful basis for a better understanding of each others' cultural and religious diversity, as well as for developing a common approach towards harmonising future legislation and policies based on best practices and common values. This will lead to the publication of a sort of PAM white paper on cultural and religious dialogue in the Mediterranean region.

## **6. Content of the report**

The first part of the report will be compiled by making a SWOT overview (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) of national practices and experiences, as well as identifying the actors involved (state, civil society, and media).

In the second part, the report will provide a summary of the policies and legislative situation, current or planned, to promote cultural and inter-religious dialogue, as well as give an overview of the media legislation and policies - if they exist - with regard to religious and cultural freedoms and non-discrimination.

In terms of fundamental rights, it would be interesting to find out to what extent there is the freedom of religious faith and freedom to worship, whether or not citizens of minority religions have the same access to civic and political rights, as well as what laws exist governing freedom of expression in terms of religion.

## **7. Organizational structures for the preparation and approval of the report**

The draft report compiled by the Rapporteur will be finalised by a small team consisting of 3 people from the Special Task Force representing different States and sub-regions. The information will be collected in response to a simple questionnaire sent to the Head of each national delegation to the PAM. They will be responsible for ensuring full, accurate and timely replies, delivering the information requested by end of October 2008 (so that the preliminary result could already be divulged at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Plenary Session of the PAM in Monaco). At the next meeting of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Standing Committee to be held in mid-September in Malta, the Rapporteur will present a brief report on the progress made, and will provide a specific list of activities to be implemented by PAM members in the form of a draft resolution.

## **8. Follow up actions by PAM Member States.**

As a result of the debate at the meeting of the Special Task Force in Fez on 12 June, it was decided that the PAM and its Members should adopt a number of concrete actions to be taken within the framework of promoting cultural and religious dialogue. This will serve the purpose of supporting one of the key objectives of the Assembly as a cross-cutting issue for the people of the region. Through a series of actions at both local, national and regional level, national parliaments will be able, with a modest investment, to initiate visible activities that involve the parliamentarians and civil society. This will also necessarily involve the close collaboration of other international and regional bodies, such as the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, the Arab Inter-parliamentary Union, the Council of Europe, and their relative parliamentary assemblies. Civil societies, academic institutions and representative of the three monotheistic religions should also be involved in this process.

Suggested activities to be incorporated in the draft resolution and in the 2009 PAM work plan (stated in random order) would include:

- (i) Parliamentary visits to PAM countries to foster understanding and partnerships
- (ii) PAM Youth Assembly to be hosted in rotation by PAM national parliaments
- (iii) « Université d'été » (university summer school) of one to two weeks' duration, which will be attended by 3-4 students from each PAM country to meet and exchange with PAM parliamentarians, academics and important figures from civil society
- (iv) PAM prize or scholarship to be awarded to students who have prepared academic research or a thesis on subjects relating to PAM activities, such as intercultural and inter-religious dialogue
- (v) Educational activities for primary school children

- (vi) Celebration of the Mediterranean Day (visibility/awareness activities) with the collaboration all PAM national delegations to include activities for the promotion of dialogue and understanding
- (vii) Teaching programmes for teachers on cultural awareness and inter-religious dialogue (with the aim of promoting the knowledge and the history of religions and not dogma in schools)
- (viii) Responsibilising the media by organising encounters to develop awareness and sensitivity
- (ix) Meeting of Special Task Force with students and religious representatives in Rome and Assisi
- (x) Launch a regional competition “dialogue among cultures” to promote intercultural dialogue (literary, cinema, art work, science, etc.).

By way of conclusion and in the light of what has been stated above and debated by the delegations attending the Special Task Force generously hosted by the Parliament of Morocco, I would like all the above activities to be remembered as the “Fez programme”, as exemplified by the spirit of our meeting and warm hospitality of the city of Fez.