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PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY– UNION FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN
ASSEMBLEE PARLEMENTAIRE – UNION POUR LA MEDITERRANEE

الجمعية البرلمانية للاتحاد من اجل المتوسط

Committee on Improving Quality of Life, Exchanges between Civil Societies, and Culture

Minutes of meeting of 19 February 2016

Summary:

On 19 February 2016, in the Sala della Regina of Palazzo Montecitorio, the Italian Chamber of Deputies hosted a meeting of the Culture Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean (PA-UfM), chaired by Mr Khalid Chaouki.

Participants:

- The European Parliament.
- Countries of the Southern shore (6): Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, Palestine and Turkey.
- EU national parliaments (10): Bulgaria, Estonia, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Portugal and Slovenia.
- Parliaments of non-EU European countries: Principality of Monaco.

Proceedings:

Opening the proceedings, the Italian Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs **Vincenzo Amendola** extended his Government's greetings to the participants and spoke of how the future of the Mediterranean needed to be seen in relation to its past when the fundamentals of a common civilization had been laid. He argued that parliamentary diplomacy was of fundamental importance because, once conjoined with government action, it could pave the way to a future of dialogue and hope. Declaring that many Mediterranean countries were in need of drive, passion and hope in a better future, he said parliamentary diplomacy could decisively contribute to the strengthening of institutions. He warned that the multi-ethnic and multicultural fabric that has characterised the Mediterranean area for millennia was now in danger of being torn asunder, and suggested that the "Positive Agenda for the Mediterranean" needed to begin with recognising that the defence of differences and multiculturalism was the starting point for conflict resolution. He concluded by stressing the importance of trade and economic exchange, which, in spite of current difficulties, continue to serve as an important tool for dialogue and peace among peoples.

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In the first session of the proceedings, entitled *The cultural heritage of the Mediterranean: preserving our roots so as to build a common future*, the Undersecretary of Culture, Mr **Antimo Cesaro**, emphasised the importance of culture and historical heritage. He observed that Italy, central to the Mediterranean both geopolitically and historically, had launched and was spearheading the "Blue Helmets for culture" initiative, which includes an active role not only for the division of the *Carabinieri* in charge of preserving artistic and cultural heritage, but also for historians and restoration experts. Mr Cesaro mentioned the many projects of cultural conservation and restoration in which various Italian institutes and universities were involved, and said he expected them to serve an important mediating role.

The next speaker was Professor **Paolo Matthiae**, Professor of Archaeology and Art History of the Ancient Near East at "La Sapienza" University of Rome, as well as Director of the Italian Archaeological Mission to Syria. Reminding his listeners of the value of the Mediterranean cultural heritage, he spoke of the need for the appreciation of diversity. Culture should be treasured not only when it reflects our own values and norms, but also when it diverges from them. For, he argued, true understanding and respect are based on the acknowledgment of cultural differences. The current wave of barbarism, however, is trying to destroy the multiplicity of cultures in Mediterranean countries that, for thousands of years, have been able to accommodate such diversity as part of their tradition. Our cultural patrimony is predicated on the principles of universality, equality and intangibility, and these principles are what must underpin all our efforts to defend it as we pursue the unconditional goal of peace.

The Director of the Tunisian National Institute of Cultural Heritage, Mr **Fethi Bahri**, spoke of the great value of the cultural patrimony of his country, which preserves elements from various different cultures and religions that have coexisted peacefully for centuries. He stressed the need to strengthen cooperation with Mediterranean institutions that are in charge of preserving cultural heritage, as well as with universities. He also spoke of the need to train young people to work in this area so that preservation work can continue into the future. The Mediterranean has always been notable for its diversity, he remarked, and that diversity is the best weapon against terrorism and the rejection of the "other".

Mr **Vincenzo Scotti**, President of Link Campus University, declared that in the face of the unprecedented human tragedy that was now unfolding, there had been an enormous shirking of

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responsibility. It was necessary to speak out about the importance of preserving cultural heritage, he said, and Europe had to do what it could to salvage the salvageable. He called for a collaborative effort to create Mediterranean cultural itineraries that would serve both as tourist routes and as building blocks for economic development and stability. Cultural patrimony can be saved if schools and universities become focal points for joint action, because it is through them that dialogue can be invigorated and historical memory made present. The Republic of Malta, which will hold the presidency of the EU next year, intends to pay particular attention to the issue of school and university education in Mediterranean countries, whose young people are often excluded from major economic and financial circles. Besides, he concluded, dialogue is now a question that concerns our everyday life. The terrorists in Europe are citizens of Europe; but they are also separate from Europe because we have failed to integrate them. Cities are one of the items included in the Millennium Development Goals; we should not build cities that foment hatred and division.

The next to take the floor was the Vice Chairman of the World Islamic Call Society (WICS), Mr **Abdulkarim Khalil**, who expressed gratitude for the invitation that had been extended to Libya, even though the country is not part of the PA-UfM. In his speech, Mr Khalil dwelt on the need to rethink the question of faith which, rather than being a source of conflict, should be an element of connection among peoples. Diversity, he said, was a gift of God and therefore deserves to be respected and preserved. He advised that a climate of suspicion and distrust all too often breeds division. As for Libya, he said that his people aspired simply to living a normal life and contributing to the well-being of the Mediterranean area.

The ensuing debate heard contributions from the following Members: **Gomes** (European Parliament), **Saadaoui** (Algeria), **Pargneaux** (European Parliament), **Karanastasis** (Greece), **Khemiri** (Tunisia), **Ercoskun** (Turkey), **Galea** (Malta), **Mussini** (Italy) and **Benabdellah** (Morocco).

The second session was dedicated to the theme *Cities as places of dialogue and major promoters of coexistence*. It opened with a talk from the Mayor of Sidi Bou Saïd, Mr **Raouf Dakhlaoui**, who, after a brief presentation of Sidi Bou Saïd, spoke of the importance of making cities places that nurture coexistence and encourage the exchange of views. He emphasised the value of cultural diversity, but specified that diversity also had to fit within the framework of

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shared citizenship, a key principle of which is the rejection of discrimination and a collective will towards peace. While cultural heritage should be cherished, he said, it should not be by mythologizing the past, but by looking straight at the present. For this reason, he argued, communication must be encouraged and cultural exchanges deepened. All elements of culture, including minority ones, should be promoted in defence of diversity. It is time to transcend the idea of cultural “consumption” and replace it with cultural commitment, in which the active force is the individual person.

Ms **Sara Funaro**, Head of the Department of Integration of the City of Florence, spoke of the efforts made by her city to encourage dialogue, overcome discrimination and promote multiculturalism. She looked back to the time of the Mediterranean Dialogues promoted by the then Mayor of Florence, Giorgio La Pira, and offered a survey of the various initiatives that the city has undertaken to foster peace and dialogue.

The Deputy Secretary General of the Great Municipality of Istanbul, Mr **Huseyin Eren**, stressed that cultural values were the common heritage of humanity. In today's globalised world, cities and countries are connected to one another through high-speed links, and it is therefore important for cities to become places that are more conducive to dialogue and coexistence, he said, citing Istanbul with its rich and diverse cultural and architectural heritage as an extraordinary example. He recalled that Turkey was looking after more than two million Syrian refugees, and that a prerequisite for any form of coexistence must be understanding and respect for others.

The next speaker was the Mayor of Benghazi, Mr **Omar El Barassi**, who thanked the Italian Government and Parliament for the welcome they had given him. He then spoke of his city, Benghazi, capital of Cyrenaica, which had always enjoyed the peaceful coexistence of different religions until recently, when terrorism and fanaticism began destroying the city's identity. The situation in the city was very grim as a result of the continuing attacks, he said, adding that Benghazi was being used as a kind of Trojan horse, not only by Western but also by Arab states. Mr El Barassi called on Italy to help consolidate peace and security in Libya and in the Mediterranean basin. Benghazi had been abandoned to deal with terrorism on its own, he said, but the commitment of its people to peace and security was evident from the fact that it has taken in 48,000 people fleeing from other cities subjected to bombing. He referred to the illegal

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immigration problem, for which Libya serves as the departure point from which criminal organisations send irregular migrants on their way to Europe, and appealed for humanitarian aid for Benghazi, which is lacking basic services. He concluded by thanking Italy for its efforts to find a peaceful solution for his country.

The last speaker of the session was a councillor of the Municipality of Tripoli, Mr **Abdulrahman Gelali**, who lamented that despite the critical situation in Libya and despite the threats to the entire world that it posed, the international community had taken no action. He stressed the commitment of the Municipality of Tripoli to defending life. Elected municipalities, he noted, along with civil society institutions, have become indispensable sources of support for their citizens. He stressed the importance of consolidating relationships with civil society, and lending support to those NGOs that are making important contributions to social organisation. The main problem, he explained, was the presence of Daesh and other terrorist organisations, which are also manifestations of tribal loyalties and of the disintegration of society. He referred to the problem of illegal immigration, and to the absence of land and sea border defences.

The ensuing debate heard contributions from: **Bani Ata** (Jordan), **Sander** (European Parliament), **Boeri** (Monaco), **Jouini** (Tunisia) and **Al Khatib** (Palestine). The last of these speakers called for the setting up of an international committee of inquiry into the situation in Palestine. Mr Chaouki gave assurances that he would bring the request to the attention of the Bureau at its next meeting.

A report on the state of progress of the projects of the Union for the Mediterranean was presented by Mr **Mario Gomes**, diplomatic councillor of the UfM Secretariat. The report reasserts the priority of educational programmes that seek to foster intercultural dialogue and tolerance at university level. It argues that the promotion of the role of women is a key factor for the socioeconomic development of society, and should be encouraged at every possible occasion through dedicated projects. Mr Gomes spoke of the signing in Morocco of a Memorandum of Understanding with Microsoft to promote women's participation in the use of new technologies, and of other projects also under way to promote female employment, prevent gender violence and promote equal opportunities through a curriculum of gender-sensitive education in Tunisia and Morocco, beginning with school books. The ultimate goal, he said, was to develop new educational programmes to spread a culture of mutual tolerance. He

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reported that Norway and Monaco had agreed to contribute to these initiatives, but noted that there were no specific projects in the cultural sector. While an agreement with UNESCO for the promotion of culture had been signed, the implementation of the envisaged projects was contingent on the appropriation of adequate funding, he noted.

Reaffirming support for the UfM Secretariat and promising to bring the need for more funding to the attention of national governments, Mr Chaouki urged the UfM to involve the PA-UfM more deeply in initiatives and in the development of programmes.