



Prof. Nikolaos Farantouris MEP

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To: The Esteemed **Members of the Executive Board of UNESCO**

Cc: **Mrs Roberta Metsola**, President of the European Parliament

Mr Glenn Micallef, EU Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport

Mrs Nela Riehl, Chair of the Committee on Culture and Education of the EU Parliament

Subject: The nomination of the new UNESCO Director-General and the Sinai Monastery

Your Excellencies,

With the utmost respect for your high office and the gravity of the responsibility entrusted to you, namely, the safeguarding of humanity's cultural and spiritual heritage, I write to you in my capacity as a Member of the Budget Committee of the European Parliament, a major contributor and supporter of the UN and UNESCO, at a moment of singular importance.

In a few weeks, the Board will nominate the new Director-General and the General Conference will appoint them. One of the announced candidates is Mr. **Khaled Ahmed El-Enany Ali**, former Minister of Culture of the **Arab Republic of Egypt**. This and any candidacy cannot be considered in a vacuum. It must be evaluated in light of the treatment of cultural and religious heritage that is entrusted, by history and by solemn international conventions, to the interested countries including Egypt.

At the heart of this reflection lies the **Monastery of Saint Catherine at Sinai**, the oldest continuously inhabited monastery in the world, founded in the reign of **Emperor Justinian** in the 6th century. For fifteen centuries, through empires, caliphates, invasions and conquests, the Monastery has stood as a beacon of continuity, learning, and spiritual devotion. It is highly respected by the Judaic tradition as the place where Moses received the Tablets of the Law, according to the old testament. Its very existence was respected even by the **Prophet Muhammad** himself, who issued a "**Charter of Protection**" to safeguard its monks, their worship, and their properties.

Thus, the Sinai Monastery is **not only a site of Orthodox Christian devotion but also a symbol of interreligious respect and coexistence** of global significance.

Yet today, this venerable institution stands in jeopardy. Since 2015, **Egyptian authorities have cast doubt** on its **property rights and patrimonial status**. Controversial court cases have been brought and judgments rendered that, if enforced, would deprive the Monastery of incidental properties and ultimately of its monastic cells and means of subsistence. It is not insignificant that **such judicial processes coincide with governmental negotiations** purportedly seeking a resolution; a coincidence that raises more questions than it resolves.

The concern is compounded by widely reported plans for large-scale tourist development of the Sinai, plans described even in the international press as resembling the **establishment of a new “Las Vegas”** in the Egyptian desert. When economic imperatives and speculative ventures are allowed to prevail over the protection of a living monument of one and a half millennia, one wonders what remains of the spirit of UNESCO’s mission. Indeed, without secure ownership of its land and properties, the Monastery risks slow suffocation: unable to sustain its life, it will be reduced to a shell, a museum for tourists rather than a sanctuary of prayer. However, the Sinai is different from any other “touristic” attraction: **its thousands of visitors are not “tourists,” they are pilgrims.**

We cannot remain silent when the very guardianship of a World Heritage Site appears compromised. Nor can we avert our eyes from the symbolism of the timing: as legal decisions are handed down in Egypt, **undermining the Monastery’s patrimony**, Egypt simultaneously seeks to assume leadership of the very organization that proclaims itself the guardian of universal heritage.

Herein lies the paradox. The world has long bowed before the majesty of Egypt’s ancient treasures: the temples of the rising sun, the enduring pyramids, the grandeur of pharaonic civilization. UNESCO itself has collaborated with Egypt in the rescue of Abu Simbel and countless other endeavors. The international community has celebrated Egypt as a custodian of civilization. And **Egypt may claim this mantle only if it respects the patrimony of Sinai**, a heritage equally ancient, equally universal, and no less sacred.

Leadership of UNESCO is not a matter of prestige alone; it is a moral responsibility. It requires that a state and its representative embody the principles of protection, inclusivity, and justice. The **mission of UNESCO** is not limited to safeguarding monuments of stone; it **extends to defending living traditions, religious rights, and communities** whose very existence is bound up with the monuments entrusted to them. To unroot such communities, or to subject them to attrition through legal maneuvers, is not conservation but erasure.

The question before us is therefore not merely procedural but existential: A state may credibly lead UNESCO only if its current policies do not **cast doubt on the future of such significant cultural heritage** — and by extension, on the **universality of heritage protection**. And a

candidate, however **distinguished** in personal capacity, may carry the torch of **UNESCO's mission** only if he/she is committed to prevent the light of Sinai, a flame kept for fifteen centuries, to flicker under the shadow of expedience.

I submit these concerns in a spirit of **friendship** and **solidarity**, and above all **in fidelity to the ideals of UNESCO** itself. The credibility of the Organization rests on the alignment of its leadership with its mission. If UNESCO is to remain the custodian not only of humanity's past but of its moral conscience, then its leaders must be beyond reproach in their commitment to justice, inclusivity, and the inviolability of heritage — whether pharaonic, Hellenic, Judaic, Christian, Islamic, or any other.

In this spirit, we urge you to weigh carefully the broader implications if the Monastery's property rights and status are not restored by the time of the election. To honor UNESCO's mission is to ensure that its helm is entrusted to those whose deeds, as much as their words, testify to an unambiguous commitment to protect the light of human civilization in all its forms.

With warm regards and the highest consideration,



Professor Nikolas Farantouris
Member of the European Parliament