

Christian barometer in the Middle East: global context

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Abstract

The plight of the Christians in the Middle East is becoming worse and worse due to different economic, political and military reasons. The international community should consolidate their efforts in order to prevent catastrophe in the region.

Key words : Christians, Middle East, exodus, plight, international community

March 2, 2015 on the sidelines of the 28th session of the UN Human Rights Geneva hosted an international high-level conference «Christians' plight in the Middle East». The conference was initiated by Russia, Lebanon, Armenia, and non-governmental organizations - Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society with the participation of the Paris Institute of Democracy and Cooperation and the support of the Permanent Mission of Russia to the UN and other international organizations in Geneva.¹

In his speech at the conference the minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov outlined that exodus of Christians from the Middle East was a process which could have the most negative consequences in preservation of historical and spiritual heritage of all mankind.

This conference was the sign of increasing concern of the world community about the situation that has emerged in the Middle East nowadays. As the deputy chairman of the Department for External Church Relations said: «The loss of the Christian presence in the Middle East will result in a further escalation of tension and violence. Destruction of the Christians was the major factor that disrupts the existing balance of inter-religious relations. Therefore, the primary task is to stop the

¹ В Женеве прошла международная конференция «Положение христиан на Ближнем Востоке»// Русская православная церковь: официальный сайт Московского патриархата. – 6 марта 2015. – URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4009027.html>.

aggression of the extremists, to make it possible to create conditions for a peaceful life of Christians and members of other traditional religious communities».²

Soon after the conference March 13 at initiative of Russia, the Vatican and Lebanon the 28th session of the UN Human Rights Council adopted a statement «In support of human rights of Christians and other communities, particularly in the Middle East».³

This statement is dictated by the catastrophic plight of Middle Eastern Christians, who are hit with unprecedented persecution by the «Islamic state» and other terrorist groups – «the existence of many religious communities is under serious threat. This is especially true of Christians, whose survival is under the question».⁴

Authors of the document state: «Millions of people have been displaced or forced to flee their ancestral lands. Those who remain in conflict areas or in areas controlled by terrorist groups, live under the constant threat of human rights violations, repression and abuse. Both communities and individuals become victims of barbaric acts of violence: they are deprived of homes, expelled from their native lands, sold into slavery, killed, decapitated and burned alive. Dozens of Christian churches and ancient shrines of all religions have been destroyed».⁵

Thus, it is the first time when on a such high international level the problem of persecution of Christians in the Middle East and their discrimination was reflected in the Declaration which was signed by 65 countries.

While the international community is finding the methods to assist vulnerable minorities in Middle Eastern countries the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria destroy museums, burn libraries and raid Assyrian villages. In Eastern Syria ISIS kidnapped hundreds of Assyrians including women and children.

² В Женеве прошла международная конференция «Положение христиан на Ближнем Востоке»// Русская православная церковь: официальный сайт Московского патриархата. – 6 марта 2015. – URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4009027.html>,

³ 65 государств приняли заявление в защиту христиан Ближнего Востока на сессии Совета по правам человека ООН // Седмица.RU: церковно-научный центр «Православная энциклопедия». – 18 марта 2015. – URL: <http://www.sedmitza.ru/text/5475328.html>,

⁴ See above – URL: <http://www.sedmitza.ru/text/5475328.html>,

⁵ See above – URL: <http://www.sedmitza.ru/text/5475328.html>.

At the turn of the twentieth century the Christians accounted for 20 to 25 percent of the population of the Middle East. Today they are barely 2 percent.⁶ Their number has been declining because of three main reasons: low birth rates, emigration for economic and political reasons and violence and wars, which results in overt discrimination and persecution.

The transfer of power of Bethlehem from Israel to the Palestinian Authority just before Christmas 1995 inspired a spate of articles on Bethlehem's diminishing Christian presence. They noted that a place not long ago 80 percent Christian is now but one-third Christian.⁷ For the first time in nearly two millennia, the most identifiably Christian town on earth has lost its Christian majority. The same changes have taken place in two other famously Christian towns, Nazareth and Jerusalem. In Nazareth, Christians went from 60 percent of the population in 1946 to 40 percent in 1983. Jerusalem Christians in 1922 slightly outnumbered Muslims (15,000 versus 13,000); today, they number under 2 percent of the city's population.⁸

Christians are fleeing from all over the Middle East. Emigration began in the aftermath of World War I and has greatly picked up in the last decade. In Turkey, Christians constituted a population of 2 million in 1920 but now only some thousands remain. So severe is the problem that the Orthodox Patriarchate in Istanbul is in danger of collapsing for lack of large enough pool of candidates. Christians earlier in this century represented about one-third of the Syrian population; now they account for less than 10 percent. In 1932, they composed 55 percent of the Lebanese population, now less than 30 percent. More than half the Christians of Iraq have left. Copts began leaving Egypt in significant numbers after the 1952 revolution.⁹

⁶ Hisham Melhem The twilight of Middle Eastern Christianity / Mehmet Hislam // Al Arabia: news. – 28.02.2015 – URL: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2015/02/28/The-twilight-of-Middle-Eastern-Christianity-.html>,

⁷ Pipes Daniel Disappearing Christians in the Middle East / Daniel Pipes // Scientific blog. – URL: <http://www.danielpipes.org/1050/disappearing-christians-in-the-middle-east>,

⁸ See above – URL: <http://www.danielpipes.org/1050/disappearing-christians-in-the-middle-east>,

⁹ See above – URL: <http://www.danielpipes.org/1050/disappearing-christians-in-the-middle-east>.

With the plight and the exodus of the Christians of the Middle East, Arab world is becoming emptier culturally and less hospitable politically. For instance, Egypt has never recovered the loss of its Copts, Jews, Greeks, Lebanese, Syrians and Armenians. Perhaps, in few years there would be no more a living Christian community in Jerusalem or Bethlehem, only monks and priests being visited by the tourists.

The situation tends to appear in the future it is predicted that the Christians number will likely drop to 6 million in the year 2020.¹⁰

The roots of appearing disaster in the Middle East goes back more than a century, to ethnic and religious cleansing that took place during the Ottoman Empire, with the murder and displacement of 1.5 million Armenian and thousands of other Christians. After the collapse of empire, the rise of Arab nationalism placed Arabic language and culture at the center of political identity, thereby the rights depriving of many non-Arab ethnic groups, including Kurds, Jews, and Syriacs.¹¹

The end of diversity in the Middle East is a tragedy for the whole region that will be in the poor condition as a result of their absence. Minorities have historically served as mediators between the Middle East and the outside world, and if they disappear, the region will lose an important cultural, economic, and intellectual class.

How a society handles ethnic and religious diversity can tell us about its capacity to negotiate disagreements. Yet diversity in the Middle East is too often considered to be its linchpin.

In order to reach peace and prosperity in the region both Christian and Muslim communities should admit several simple postulates.

¹⁰ Sahner Christian The Arab world vanishing Christians / Christian Sahner // Project Syndicate. – URL: <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/middle-east-christians-minorities-by-christian-c--sahner-2014-12#1wGscMY7tlo38llx.99>,

¹¹ John L., Allen Jr. Hard truths about the survival of Christianity in the Middle East / L. John, Jr. Allen // CRUX. – URL: <http://www.cruxnow.com/church/2015/02/17/hard-truths-about-the-survival-of-christianity-in-the-middle-east/>.

First, the Christian leaders of the region need to recognize that sometimes they can be their own enemy in terms of attracting broad support around the world, especially in the United States, that could be less humanitarian and turned to be political and military.

Second, Muslims should recognize that they need Christians as the departure of Christians creates a social vacuum that is almost impossible to fill. Their presence is not only the best hopes for a democratic and pluralistic society but Christians have also run the Middle East's best schools and hospitals, and they have constituted a large share of intellectual and professional classes.

Third, it should be admitted by the whole international community that the link between Western Christianity and Middle Eastern one is vital for the spiritual health of Christianity.

The bottom line is that everyone beginning from Christian minority, its Muslim majority, and Western Christians of all stripes should feel the utmost importance of keeping the Christian presence alive.