De-Christianization of the Middle East
ARVAK Center comment, June 23, 2025[1]

1. Introduction

The processes of geopolitical redivision in the Middle East, which began with the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003, has had numerous unpredictable consequences. One of the most significant and alarming results has been the growing phenomenon – ***de-Christianization of the region.*** Paradoxically, the *"New Crusade"* by the West, carried out under the slogans *of "the fight against global Islamic terrorism"*, has effectively violated the traditional balance of religious tolerance and interfaith pluralism. This has led to a shift in the epicenter of activity of radical Islamist movements oriented withanti-Christian ideologies from Central Asia (Afghanistan and Pakistan) to Western Asia.

The second wave of Western-initiated reorganization of the region, known as the *"Arab Spring"*, also had no less paradoxical consequences. Instead of the declared democratization of the *"authoritarian Arab countries"*. The Middle East and Maghreb have been deeply destabilized and have exacerbated the intolerance of the Islamic majority towards small Christian groups and communities.

2. Historical Context and Pre-Intervention Situation

Before the West's active intervention in the Middle East security architecture, Islamic democracies (e.g. Turkey, Lebanon), monarchies (Saudi Arabia, UAE, etc.), theocratic (Iran) and authoritarian regimes (e.g. Iraq, Syria, Egypt, etc.) relatively effectively supported religious pluralism. This corresponded to the traditional Middle East paradigm of mutual complementarity and peaceful coexistence of Muslim and Christian communities in the space where the so-called *"Abrahamic cults"* originated.

Before the radical intervention of the West, almost no conflict in the Middle East, whether interstate confrontation or civil war, directly affected the interests of Christian communities. These communities, being maximally apolitical, preferred to build normal relations with the existing systems and adapt to their political transformations. For example, the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979) practically did not affect the basic rights and freedoms of Christian minorities, such as Armenians, Assyrians, Georgians. Although the new clerical order contributed to a large-scale outflow of the Christian population, this was more associated with the rejection of the liquidation of the secular system than with targeted persecution. A similar motive prompted a significant number of Iranian Muslims to emigrate – according to various estimates, from 2 to 5 million Iranians professing Islam.

The Baathist regimes in Iraq and Syria (since the 1960s), professing the ideology of pan-Arabism and Arab socialism, sought not to upset the fragile balance in relations with Christian communities, recognizing their significant importance in the economic and financial development of their countries. Christians in Egypt and Turkey also enjoyed a fairly tolerant government policy and a loyal attitude from society, given their gravitation

---

[1] The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 21.06.2025.

toward the Western secular civilization model and the weak manifestations of aggressive political Islam at that time. The most comfortable position was for small Christian communities in Arab monarchies (UAE, Kuwait, etc.), where political stability and a strong vertical power structure provided Christian communities with conditions for demographic growth and prosperity.

Lebanon experienced the greatest problems of religious intolerance, where, as a result of the civil war (1975–1990), tens of thousands of Christians, mainly Maronites, were subjected to internal deportation, deprived of property, and were subjected to violence. However, it is a mistake to view the Lebanese events in the light of a religious confrontation that flared up due to intolerance towards Christians. This was a conflict of ambitions of various parties and ethno-confessional groups (Maronite Christians, Shiites, Druze, local Sunni clans, Palestinian settlers, pro-Syrian forces) striving for control over political power and the country's financial and economic resources. Christians in Lebanon were full participants in this redistribution, fully experiencing the most severe consequences of the *bellum omnes contra omnes* ("the war of all against all", in Latin).

3. Dynamics of the Outflow of the Christian Population up to 2003

An analysis of statistical data from the countries in the Middle East shows that by the end of the 20th century, Christian communities in most countries of the region enjoyed the loyalty of their political systems. In addition to generally accepted civil rights, these communities enjoyed partial intra-communal legal and administrative autonomy (Iran), had quota representation in the legislative and executive branches (Lebanon, Iran), and were also institutionally protected from encroachment by the "titular" Islamic groups.

Statistics show that during that period the dynamics of the outflow of Christians from the Middle East to the West (Western Europe, the USA) did not differ much from the indicators of population movement in the same direction from post-Soviet Christian countries, Eastern Europe and Latin American countries. This points to the predominantly apolitical nature of the motives for the migration of the Middle Eastern Christians, associated with their intention to settle in a more progressive socio-economic and similar mental-civilizational environment. The impulsive outflow of Christians from certain countries during the specified period was caused by a lack of security due to regional wars and civil confrontations (the Lebanese Civil War of 1975–1990, the Iran–Iraq War of 1980–1988, the invasion of the Iraqi army into Kuwait in 1990, etc.). Thus, it is impossible to speak of targeted persecution of Christians in the region, caused by religious intolerance and the global radicalization of Islamic ideology, until the beginning of the 21st century.

4. Dechristianization after 2003: Country Cases

The conventional starting point of global radicalization and, as a consequence, the strengthening of de-Christianization can be called the date of the Western coalition's invasion of Iraq in 2003. The overthrow of the regime of Saddam Hussein, who was considered the pillar of secularism in the Arab world and the main restraining factor on the

path to the formation of political Islam as a dominant geopolitical transformation in the Middle East, paradoxically, contributed to the growth of Islamism. Saddam Hussein was one of the main enemies of Al-Qaeda, yet he became the target of the West's main attack.

The actual disintegration of a unified secular Iraq not only failed to curb the growth of Islamism, but also paved the way for the emergence of the most radical Islamic groups and the spread of jihadist ideas throughout the Middle East. Iraq became a favorable environment for the cultivation of a "*pan-Islamist monster*" due to the hatred of Western civilization caused by NATO aggression, the disastrous social situation of the population, and numerous abandoned arsenals of weapons. In these conditions, the emergence of organizations such as ISIS, based on former army personnel and employees of security structures, who were looking for a new ideological paradigm for anti-Western revanchism, became natural.

The so-called *"Arab Spring"*, which undermined stability in neighboring Syria, became the trigger for the official entry into the arena of ISIS and numerous satellite groups, which translated the Salafist interpretation of the idea of jihad as a fight against *"Christian neo-imperialism"* into the plane of practical politics. It is natural that the Christian communities of the Middle East, which found themselves within the reach of the Islamist International, which had qualitatively improved its structure and military power, were the first to come under attack.

4.1. Iraq

Christian communities in Iraq were in great danger not only because of direct attacks by Islamist armed groups, but also because of the general change in the social climate and the growth of hostile relations on the part of the Muslim domination, which had previously been tolerant. There were recorded cases of looting and intimidation of the Christian population by local Muslims. In the conditions of permanent danger, an unhealthy social climate, difficult social conditions and an uncertain future, the outflow of Christian groups from Iraq was predetermined.

According to open sources, before the First Gulf War (1990–1991), there were up to 1.5 million Christians in Iraq (Chaldo-Catholic Assyrians, Assyrians who follow the traditional Assyrian Church of the East, Armenians, etc.). On the eve of the Western coalition's invasion of Iraq in 2003, their numbers had dropped to 800,000. By 2024, the total number of Iraqi Christians was no more than 250,000. About 500,000 people left Iraq during the emergence and expansion of ISIS terrorist activity alone (in 2014 – 125,000). Statistics show that even after the liquidation of ISIS, the rate of Christian outflow from Iraq has not decreased. The outflow dynamics indicate that within the next 5-10 years there will be practically no Christian population left in this Arab country. In recent years, 2,000 people (including 17 priests) have been assassinated there and about 70 churches have been destroyed in Baghdad and Mosul.

4.2. Syria

The situation is similar in neighboring Syria, where the presence of Christian communities has deep historical roots. In 2013 alone, about 1,200 Christians were killed due to religious hatred in the country, which is torn apart by civil war. More than 60 churches were destroyed and looted. About 500,000 Christians of various denominations (Armenians, Chalcedonian Syrians, Catholics, Nestorians, etc.) left Syria. After the overthrow of the Bashar al-Assad regime and the coming to power of an opposition coalition consisting of gangs raised on Islamist ideas, the situation for Syrian Christians became even more complicated, and the issue of their safety acquired an existential character.

4.3. Egypt

According to international human rights organizations, about 13,000 Coptic Christians, traditionally considered a segment of society especially protected by the state, left Egypt in 2013. However, their situation worsened after the government that came to power in the country a year earlier, was formed by the *"Muslim Brotherhood"*, a radical Islamic party that closely cooperates with ISIS. The intense exodus of Coptic Christians continues to this day. The secular government of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi is either unable or no longer willing to protect the Coptic Christian minority (about 10% of Egypt's population) from increasing pressure from the Muslim population (pogroms, attacks on churches, murders) and provocations by Islamist forces. Cairo's recent decision to close the Greek Orthodox Monastery of St. Catherine in Sinai on the pretext of *"ensuring the safety of the monastery"* sounds unconvincing, given that official Athens has repeatedly asked not to close the monastery, assuring that it will not blame Egypt even in the event of an attack on the sanctuary by Islamist extremists. Apparently, the al-Sisi government is responding to signals it is receiving, indicating extreme discontent among the country's Muslim majority and *"excessive concern"* about the comfort and safety of *"spoiled"* Christian minorities and their cultural and religious heritage.

4.4. Saudi Arabia

In parallel with the strengthening of the "Islamist International" in the Middle East, the persecution of Christians has also increased in Saudi Arabia. The state prohibits its citizens from practicing Christianity at the legislative level. Visiting Christians and emigrants (Eritreans, Ethiopians, Filipinos, etc.) are subjected to torture and expulsion, and sometimes the death penalty if they are suspected of spreading Christian ideas. The Vatican's attempts to persuade the attitude of the Royal House of Saud to the problem of Christians have been unsuccessful. The Saudi Royal House, which adheres to radical Islamic views bordering on Salafism and, in sync with the "Islamist International" continues the policy of persecuting Christians as marginal groups that allegedly pose a threat to the country's security.

4.5. Turkey

The process of generating anti-Christian protests has also affected Turkey, which positions itself as a country with *"a deep tradition of confessional liberalism and freedom of religion"*. The general trend of growing anti-Christian socio-political sentiments due to the events in the Middle East has been compounded by the radicalization of the attitude of the ruling regime towards ethnic minorities allegedly carrying out subversive activities against the foundations of the Turkish state. Greeks and Armenians, traditionally professing Christianity, as well as other small ethnic groups belonging to the Eastern Churches, Catholicism and Protestantism, have found themselves under strong pressure from government agencies and segments of society radicalized by the government since the government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan began to gravitate towards the ideas of national Islamism. Since the early 2000s, Christian ethnic groups have been systematically subjected to attacks by ultra-radical groups. Assassination attempts on priests and parishioners, arson and shouting firearms on churches, vandalism of Christian sanctuaries and cemeteries are constantly recorded. The state systematically arrests clergy, expropriates ancient temples and church property. Christians are persecuted on both religious and ethnic grounds, becoming a marginal segment. Although there is no fixed data on the dynamics of the outflow of the Christian population from Turkey, the intensification of this process in recent years is obvious: the number of parishioners is decreasing, churches and Sunday schools are closing.

4.6. Nagorno-Karabakh

Nagorno-Karabakh is one of the most illustrative examples of the mass de-Christianization of the region. The aggressive policy of Azerbaijan and the instilled Armenophobia have led to the final de-Armenization, and therefore to the de-Christianization of the region (2020–2023), which is considered the original patrimony of Christian civilization. 150,000 Artsakh Christians have been forcibly expelled from their homeland, their ancient temples and sanctuaries are being destroyed or expropriated as part of the implementation of pseudo-historical and pseudo-scientific concepts. The rich Armenian Christian trace of Artsakh is being methodically erased. Official Baku is purposefully pursuing a policy to achieve identical goals in the case of Armenia itself, striving for its depopulation and the destruction of a thousand-year-old civilization, the first to lay the Christian faith as the basis for its secular development.

5. Conclusions

As follows from the data provided, the ***de-Christianization of a vast region from Central Asia to Egypt and from the Balkans to the Indian Ocean coast has continued with unabated momentum over the past two decades***. Even in such a relatively liberal country with respect to small Christian groups as Iran, their further existence is now under great threat, given the growing confrontation between Tehran and Tel Aviv. It is expected that a potential large-scale war between Iran and Israel will

stimulate a new significant flow of Christian exodus, and, above all, Armenians. On the other hand, such traditionally secular countries of the region as Egypt, under the growing pressure of Islamization, are forced to balance on public sentiment and often resort to unpopular, from the point of view of international image, decisions. The latest events in Israel also show that this country, which is the cradle and guardian of the Christian tradition, is showing signs of unfriendly sentiments and undermining solidarity among the *"cults of the Abrahamic tradition"*. The increasing attacks by Jewish ultra-radicals on Christian clergy and believers are not actually stopped by the state, and the state itself is participating in a campaign to confiscate the property of the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem in favor of front Israeli companies with a dubious reputation.

Thus, the review of the studied materials allows us to conclude that the de-Christianization of the Middle East is taking place in a systematic form and with non-stop dynamics. There is no doubt that one of the main reasons for the Christian depopulation in the region is ***excessively active geopolitical intervention of the West in the Middle East configuration.*** However, the question of the West's intentionality and interest in such a result still remains open for further research.