Metropolitan Hilarion: Middle East and Ukraine – parts of the same strategy

The causes of the wide spread of radical Islamist ideologies and ways of solving the problem; the military conflicts in the Middle East as related to the escalation of violence in Ukraine; the fate of the kidnapped Metropolitans of Syria are subjects of the interview given to RIA-Novosti by the chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's department for external church relations, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk.

- How would you describe the increasing spread of radical Islamist ideologies and violence towards people of other religions in the Middle East? What does it all lead to? And who profits?

- The recent growth of extremism under religious slogansis a serious challenge to the entire world community. The destabilization in the Middle East is a consequence of not only the civic confrontation but also of the fact that leading world powers have their own political and economic interests in that region. Some countries stir up inter-confessional strife there, which leads to grievous consequences for the region.

When killers, kidnappers and extremists are supplied with arms it is impossible to justify it by any far-reaching political purposes. The destabilization of the entire Middle East, encouraged from outside, has led to the fact that Christians in several countries are facing the threat of full elimination.

We are especially concerned by the fact that as a result of this confrontation, Christians are leaving the Middle East en masse and the scale of this exodus is growing every month. Being native people of the region, Christians have to flee their home on pain of death. And even in refugee camps they cannot feel safe in the face of discrimination, threats and kidnappings.

The situation in Egypt has shown that when power is taken by those who sternly and resolutely oppose radicals the situation of Christians improves. In a recent interview given by Patriarch Theodore II of Alexandria to your news agency, he said that the situation of Christians in Egypt stabilized thanks to the policy adopted by the new President of the country Abdel Fattah Sisi.

- Do you see a link between the growth of tension, provocations and escalation of armed conflicts in the Middle East and, for instance, the developments in Ukraine?

- The buildup of tension in the Middle East and in Ukraine is parts of the same strategic plan. Among the aims of this strategy is this: to create a hotbed of chronic confrontation at the borders of our country.

I am sure that the policy of double standards and the theory of “controlled chaos” will not bring any long-term success to their proponents. It is terrible that the toll inflicted today on nations by immoral political actions appear to some to be an acceptable cost.

- What information on the persecution of Christians in the Middle East is available to the Russian Orthodox Church today? Have the Maalula nuns been freed and what is the fate of other people who have been taken captive for their faith? What is known today about the Syrian metropolitans who were kidnapped over a year ago?

- On December 25-26, 2013, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church “expressed serious concern over the continued persecution and discrimination of the Christian population in many countries of the Middle East and North Africa” and stated “the need to continue active actions aimed at drawing the attention of the world public to the tragic situation of Christians in the Middle East and North Africa regions and promoting a peace settlement of the conflicts through interreligious and international dialogues”. For the Russian Orthodox Church, support for persecuted Christians is a special concern and one of the key areas of external church work.

Since the kidnapping of the two metropolitans in Syria, there has been no reliable evidence that they are alive. There are no photographs or video- or voice records. Occasionally we have received from various sources information about their whereabouts, which apparently has been changed more than once. But there is no way to verify the information. We very much fear for their lives but pray for their speedy deliverance.

- The Russian Church, just as the Russian State, constantly calls for peace and preservation of Christian presence in the Middle East. Why is it so important today? And what is the reason for it – history, politics or worldview?

- The Middle East is the cradle of Christianity. It was there that one of the first Christian communities appeared in the 1st century and the very name “Christians” was used. The Orthodox Church of Antioch is a Sister Church for us, and we take her hardships with a heavy heart.

We know that extremists destroy churches and Christian institutions and exterminate shrines of significance of the whole Christendom. We take the suffering of Christians in Syria as our own. Our people are too well aware of what war is and persecution for Christian faith is.

Through centuries our Church has given moral and material support to the suffering Middle East Christians. On a regular basis we put the situation of the Middle East Christians on the agenda of international events and meetings with religious and political leaders. We have repeatedly appealed to the world community, international organizations and political and religious leaders, reminding them of the dangerous consequences of the mass exodus of Christians from their native lands and called for all possible measures to be taken to protect and preserve the Christian presence in the region.

Much effort has been exerted by the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society, which is preparing now already the 11th air shipment of humanitarian aid to suffering Christians in Syria. This time it will go to those who live in the Valley of Christians.

On July 28, the St. Andrew Charity hosted a group of Syrian orphans for health improvement at one of the recreation bases near Moscow. There are altogether 100 children of various ages in the group. Among them are inmates of a Damascus-based boarding school for children of the fallen servicemen and the orphanage run by the St. Tekla Convent in Maalula. There are also children with injuries. The Russian Orthodox Church Representation to the Patriarch of Antioch has taken an active part in organizing this trip.

- What is your take of the situation in Iraqi Mosul and in Iraq as a whole?

- What happened to Christians in Mosul and Nineveh in July is utterly monstrous. I will remind you that under Saddam Hussein there were 1,5 million Christians living in Iraq. With the help of the external military force his regime was overthrown, allegedly in the name of democracy. Among the results of this “democratization” was the persecution against Christians. Soon they were to be only some 100 thousand left in Nineveh with the center in Mosul. For the last ten years, faced with terror actions and threats, over a half of Christians have become refugees from that region.

In June 2014, tens of thousands of Christians had to leave their homes for the fear of aggression and to flee to Iraqi Kurdistan as terrorists of the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) were approaching. At present, about 100 thousand Christians are reported to hide in Kurdistan. Most of the Christians who remained in Mosul or those who were stopped by the militants in an attempt to escape from the city were killed. On July 18, the extremists demanded that all the remaining Christians embrace Islam or leave their homes immediately, taking nothing with them. Formally it was also suggested that each family pay 450 dollars as a tax but none proved to have such money. There appeared special marks on Christians’ houses with an inscription “This property belongs of the Islamic State”.

It should be noted that the reaction of the world community was more active than in the case of Syrian Christians. France even stated that it was ready to accept Christians from Iraq. However, the West has

made no practical steps to liberate the territories seized by the ISIL. The positions of extremists who have declared the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate in the territory of Iraq and Syria are still strong. One of the leaders of the Iraqi extremists has already revealed a plan for creation of a European Islamic Caliphate in Spanish Andalusia.

- Do you think the Iraqi and Syrian authorities and religious leaders are doing all that depends on them to stop the expulsion and massacre of Christians in these two countries?

- Christian leaders in Iraq are doing all that is possible for them to draw the attention of the world community to the hardships of their flocks. The Chaldean Patriarch of Babylon, Raphael Louis Sako, made a number of statements about it. Patriarch Ephrem II of the Syrian Catholic Church has actively worked with the authorities of Iraqi Kurdistan, where most of the refugees have found asylum, coordinating the practical efforts to provide the necessary facilities for refugees. Religious leaders have proposed to set up a joint committee including representatives of the refugees and the Kurdish government for providing these facilities to forced asylum seekers.

Some influential leaders of traditional Islam in Iraq reject the ISIL's ideology. Sheikh Khalid al-Mullah, the Sunni leader in Iraq and head of the Association of Muslim Schools in the South, has condemned the expulsion of Christians from Mosul. The fate of the country depends to a considerable extent on how consistent the people of traditional Islam will be in standing up against the ISIL's ideology. The Ba'ath Party in Iraq has declared a war on the ISIL. Ordinary Muslims, during an action in Bagdad, expressed support for Christians, who have lived in Iraq for almost two thousand years.

- What Christian refugees are to do? Where can they find an asylum?

- Most Christians banished from Mosul and Nineveh are related to the Holy Synod, therefore the Vatican has made active efforts to help them. I have already mentioned that France has agreed to accept some Christian refugees. Regrettably, other countries in Europe continue to hush up this tragedy.

The UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has qualified the "cleansing" of Christians in the second largest city of Iraq as a crime against humanity, but neither the government of Great Britain nor the European Union have spoken up. There are refugees from Syria in Russia as well. There are public organizations which seek to help them. But, regrettably, the need to accept and accommodate at short notice hundreds of thousands of refugees from Ukraine has limited the resources of our country in this area.

Interviewer: Olga Lipich

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