

The Moscow Patriarchate and the Persecuted Church in the Middle East

by John Eibner

The genesis of this talk goes back to a conversation that I had in June 2013 with the former President of Lebanon, Amine Gemayel, while motoring up the M40 to a conference at St Antony's, Oxford. In January 2011, just as the first phase of the so-called 'Arab Spring' was getting underway in Tunisia, Gemayel declared to the international media that 'Massacres are taking place for no reason and without any justification against Christians. It is only because they are Christians. What is happening to Christians is a genocide.'¹ Gemayel's assessment was echoed within a week by then French President Nicolas Sarkozy who stated 'We cannot accept and thereby facilitate what looks more and more like a particularly perverse programme of cleansing in the Middle East, religious cleansing.'²

Gemayel's and Sarkozy's strong language about anti-Christian crimes against humanity was prompted by massacres of Christians in churches in Baghdad and Alexandria.³ These statesmen recognised that these acts of terror in Iraq and Egypt were not isolated criminal incidents, but were instead part of an insidious pattern of anti-Christian violence that ran in tandem with contemporary political trends, one manifestation of which were the 'Arab Spring' demonstrations. Their warnings, while



St Mary's Greek Catholic Church in Yabroud, Syria, desecrated in 2014 by the Islamist Jabhat al-Nusra & the Islamic Front

gaining little political traction in the West, have been vindicated by subsequent events, especially in Syria and Iraq.

During that M40 conversation, Amine Gemayel shared with me a small ray of hope on the international front. This elder Maronite Christian statesman had the impression that the Russians, having close historic connections with the region's Orthodox churches, were well aware of the existential threat facing the Christians in the Middle East, and had undertaken some constructive initiatives to address the crisis facing Christian civilization in the Orient. I had some personal grounds for taking this message seriously. As a result of my visits to Nagorno Karabakh in the early 1990s, I was aware that Russia, under

Yeltsin, had played a crucial role in bringing about a suspension of the religious and ethnic cleansing in and around Karabakh in 1993, thereby preserving the presence of Armenian Christians in their ancient homeland. Without the constructive role of Russia, it is reasonable to assume that today Karabakh would be for all practical purposes an Armenian Christian-free zone, like the Azerbaidzhani cities of Baku and Sumgait. So I followed up on President Gemayel's lead, and was surprised at what I discovered: the once persecuted Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), now free from the shackles of militant atheistic Communism, was campaigning vigorously on behalf of the existentially threatened Christians of the Middle East, and doing so without much recognition in the West.

The Moscow Patriarchate uses this freedom in three ways. Firstly, it eases the isolation of the Middle East's churches, most of which, apart from Rome-related communions, have only weak links with churches in the West. It does so through its institutional relations with regional Orthodox Churches and through fellowship with ecumenical partners. Secondly, the ROC raises funds for humanitarian assistance for displaced Middle East Christians and their non-Christian neighbours. It reported having raised 1.3 million dollars from Russian parishes in the summer of 2013 for such aid. These funds were transferred to the bank account of the Damascus-based Orthodox Church of Antioch.⁴ Lastly, the Moscow Patriarchate vigorously undertakes advocacy actions as a part of dialogue with the Russian government, with members of the international community, its ecumenical partners, and representatives of other faiths, especially Islam. With a view to creating awareness and mobilising opinion, the Patriarchate keeps the issue alive in the Russian media.

The Moscow Patriarchate sounded the alarm about the persecution of Christians in the very early days of the 'Arab Spring' uprisings, when these were still frequently referred to in the media as the 'Facebook' Revolution. In May 2011, the Holy Synod adopted a document on Christophobia, which highlighted severe persecution leading to the 'mass emigration of Christians from countries in which they have lived for centuries', citing Iraq and Egypt by name.⁵ The church's activity to combat Christophobia in the Middle East is executed under the direction of Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, Chairman of the Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations (DECR).

Perhaps the most detailed and comprehensive document presenting the Patriarchate's perspective on the existential crisis facing Middle East Christians is an interview given by Metropolitan Hilarion in April 2014 to RIA-Novosti.⁶ In it, Hilarion draws together all the main themes of the issue that are found scattered in a host of statements. The 48 year-old Metropolitan, holding a DPhil from Oxford, is no fossilised relic of the Soviet past. He is at ease in the western world and communicates effectively with it.⁷ In this interview he declared: 'At present in the Middle East there is unprecedented persecution of Christians.' To make clear that he is not talking simply about social and legal disabilities, Hilarion, like Gemayel and Sarkozy, uses the strongest possible language. Christians in some parts of the region, he said, are in the midst of a 'real genocide'. Middle Eastern Christians, he reported, are witnessing the desecration and destruction of church buildings, the kidnapping and execution of priests and laity, and the bombardment of their neighbourhoods. Many are confronted with a stark choice of either paying tribute or leaving their

homes, while the price of failure to do either of the above is death. Fearing that it is the considered goal of extremists to 'banish Christians from their homes by terror or physical elimination', Middle Eastern Christians, Hilarion laments, often 'have to escape to other countries'. There is now, he says, 'a mass exodus of Christians from the Middle East'.

At the time of the RIA/Novosti interview, Metropolitan Hilarion viewed Christians in Syria, who then made up about 10% of the country's population, as the most endangered Christian community in the region. There, he reports, 'various armed bands are at work, systematically eliminating Christians and people of other religious communities'. According to the figures in his possession, over 1,000 Christians have been killed, about 100 churches and monasteries have been damaged, and over 600,000 Christians have had to flee their homes, with most finding refuge abroad.

The existential crisis facing Christians in Iraq is now scarcely less grave than in Syria. Metropolitan Hilarion estimated that the Iraqi Christian population, which numbered about 1.5 million before the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, had subsequently decreased by more than one million. But since the Metropolitan's interview, hundreds of thousands of additional Christians and Yezidis have been forced to flee their homes as a result of the Islamic State's conquest of Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, and surrounding parts of Nineveh Province. Metropolitan Hilarion also chose to highlight Libya. He noted that 'a great part of its small Christian community ... had to flee the country', while 'those who have remained, mostly Egyptian Copts, are subjected to regular attacks, often with [a] lethal end'.

In stark contrast to the dire situation of Christians in Syria, Iraq, and Libya – all of which have been the subject of American regime change policies – Metropolitan Hilarion found a more hopeful situation in Egypt – a country that has recently undergone an authoritarian counter-



Dr John Eibner (left) talking to Amine Gemayel, former President of Lebanon

revolution. He wanted the world to know that Christians are not persecuted by the government of General Sisi, as opposed to that of his Muslim Brotherhood predecessor, Mohammed Morsi; and that the counter-revolution in Egypt had greatly improved the climate for Christian-Muslim relations. But despite this positive development, Hilarion noted that 'adherents of Islamic radical parties' – contrary to the will of the Sisi government – 'continue committing attacks'.

I cannot vouch for all the statistics presented by Metropolitan Hilarion, but the broad strokes of the picture he paints correspond to what I have observed during many visits to the region.

The Moscow Patriarchate also addresses the causes of the current wave of persecution. Metropolitan Hilarion chooses his words carefully when speaking about its religious character. He has good reason to address this issue gingerly. 15% or more of Russia's population is Muslim, and much of its southern underbelly

borders Muslim majority states. Moreover, as a result of the involvement of Saudi Arabia in support of Islamic rebels, the potentially contagious Chechen wars of the 1990s came close to being internationalised and taking on a dangerous pan-Islamic character. Thus, in his RIA-Novosti interview, Metropolitan Hilarion spoke in accordance with the ROC's tradition of respectful relations with conservative, established Islamic authority and institutions. He therefore did not hammer repeatedly the Islamic nail, but laid the blame more generally at the feet of 'religious extremism'. But he did note that crowds of excited Muslims, chanting Islamic slogans, attack Christian churches immediately following the imam's Friday sermon. The ideology that drives anti-Christian agitation, Hilarion observed, emanates from what he identified as 'influential forces in the Gulf'. While he chose not to name names, Hilarion clearly meant Washington's rich and influential regional allies – Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE and Kuwait.

Metropolitan Hilarion was much more direct in drawing attention to the external political forces that have created conditions for what he calls the 'full scale persecution' of the Church in the Middle East. He was not slow in pointing the finger at the US and its European allies for destabilising the Middle East. They did so by playing a decisive role in the overthrow of the rulers of Iraq, Libya, and Egypt, while attempting to do the same in Syria. There the attempt is still a catastrophic work in progress. These American efforts, Hilarion bewailed, were accompanied by rhetoric about building western-style democracy, while in reality, he claimed, 'force and revolution' were the western powers' chosen instruments for reshaping the Middle East's political landscape. Washington's re-

gime change policy, he continued, took no account of the historic and religious traditions that were the basis of relations between the different religious communities. The result of western policy was, in Hilarion's view, 'the aggravation of internal controversies', and the 'encouragement of extremists and terrorists to flock to these countries from other regions of the world'.

In addition to its sins of commission, he also accused the West of a grave sin of omission – i.e. refusing to support the persecuted Middle East Christians, thereby leaving them with no option but to spend the rest of their lives as displaced people, many in foreign exile. The Maronites of Syria and Lebanon, Hilarion said, were particularly disappointed in France, which had historically 'protected' them, but now refused to do so. I assume that the Metropolitan singled out France because it was French insistence on the protection of Catholic holy sites in Palestine in the mid-19th century – protection not from the Islamic Ottoman rulers, but from the local Orthodox religious authorities – that sparked the events leading to Russia's humiliation in the Crimean War. In contrast to the western powers, Russia, Hilarion claimed 'has remained the only defender of the Christian presence in the region', one on which 'many Christians remaining in [the] "hotbeds" have set their hopes'.

I do not find, however, any Middle East Christians who expect Russia, on its own, to intervene militarily to protect them. All understand that Russia is no longer a super-power and its influence and presence in the region is greatly reduced compared to Soviet times. But that does not mean that many do not entertain some hope that Russia might miraculously prove to be a catalyst for changing the dynamics of post-Cold

War international relations which have contributed so powerfully to create conditions for widespread religious cleansing in the Middle East. In Egypt, for example, Coptic opinion was greatly encouraged when Sisi met Putin in summer 2014 in the Black Sea on board the guided missile cruiser Moskva and struck a set of military and economic deals.

I was twice in Syria in 2013, and found anti-American and pro-Russian passions within the Christian community even stronger than in Egypt. For all its grave faults, the Assad regime has for decades been the protector of Syria's religious minority communities. President Obama acknowledged this to a delegation of visiting Middle Eastern bishops in an off-the-record encounter in September 2014.⁸ For the past two years, Washington, together with its Sunni regional allies – principally Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey – have been supporting anti-Christian Islamist militias in the effort to achieve regime change in Syria, much as the US did in the 1980s to drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan.⁹ Turkey, a NATO member and candidate for EU membership, has become the principal gateway for Syria-bound jihadists.

When Christians are displaced by the conflict, they will either seek protection abroad or in parts of Syria that are still controlled by the Syrian government, such as Tartus. Russia's last Mediterranean naval base is located in there. The displaced whom I encountered in Tartus – Christians, Alawites and Sunni Muslims – take comfort in the close proximity of the Russian naval presence. They do so in the belief that this Russian military asset results in the protection of the surrounding area. There is, moreover, widespread belief within the Syrian Christian community that had Russia failed to honour its

military commitments to the Syrian government, they would have been left completely unprotected from the crowds who were chanting 'Alawites to the grave, and Christians to Beirut' during the early days of the 'Arab Spring'.

I was in Iraq twice in the summer 2014 following the Islamic State's conquest of Mosul and surrounding Christian and Yazidi villages. There, I encountered a severely traumatised Iraqi Christian community. As I wrote following my return in a blog for *The Tablet*, the Iraqi Christian community has lost faith in the ability of the government in Baghdad, the Kurdish regional authority in Erbil, and the US and its allies, to protect them from the Islamic state and other extremists.¹⁰ Some of my Iraqi Christian contacts, including those who worked together with the American armed forces in Operation Iraq Freedom, now look back wistfully to the days before the American-led invasion and occupation in 2003, when Russia was the main ally of the Iraqi state. Under the tyrannical rule of Saddam Hussein, violent anti-Christian Islamist fanaticism found no place in public life.

I have found in the Middle East that persecuted Christians view the US and its western allies very differently from the hopeful, expectant way that persecuted Christians in the Soviet bloc did. The American human rights agenda, in practice, does not appear to them to address their main concern – survival as Christians in their own ancient homelands. Moreover, many see Washington allied regionally not with democratic forces, but with the very powers that ideologically and financially fuel anti-Christian persecution. It is old-fashioned protection, not new-fangled and often toothless human rights jargon that interests them.

While Middle East Christians tend to view the West as immensely rich and free, they also tend to see it as a post-Christian, deconstructionist society; one in which Christianity appears to have a bleak future, one that has no real interest in them. The post-Soviet Russian state, on the other hand, increasingly strives to demonstrate Christian credentials, by being openly supportive of the ROC and its traditional values. Western liberalism has yet to make its mark on Middle Eastern Christians, and convince them that it can guarantee their survival. The Moscow Patriarchate offers a policy to prevent the disappearance of Christian communities in the Middle East and calls for the creation of a mechanism for the protection of the region's religious minorities – a mechanism under the control of the world community, and not under the control of one superpower. It furthermore urges the most developed powers to provide economic aid to the region conditional on the protection of religious minorities, and the termination of support for religious extremist groups.

Why has the Moscow Patriarchate placed such a strong emphasis on prevention of the de-Christianisation of the Middle East? When I put this question to a member of the Patriarchate's DECR in 2014, I was told that it can be inferred from the Council of Bishops' 2013 statement in 'support of our brothers – Christians in the Middle East' that the Moscow Patriarchate identifies the 'whole of Christianity as parts of Christ's body and as brothers'. When asked for more substance, my interlocutor did not appeal to a well-developed theological position, nor to international human rights and religious liberty instruments, but to the tradition of the ROC. Even in Soviet times, I was told, the Moscow Patriarchate and the churches of the Middle East tried to be mutually supportive. After Stalin

agreed in 1944 to ease the policy of persecution and end the Patriarchate's total isolation from the outside world, external relations were first resumed with the Orthodox Patriarchates of Alexandria, Jerusalem and Antioch.¹¹ With the Soviet Union enjoying at the very least respectful relations with some key Middle Eastern states during the Cold War, the Moscow Patriarchate had better opportunities to develop external relations there than in the West. The Soviet leadership's desire that the ROC should have high visibility in its 'peace movement' also created many opportunities for the Moscow Patriarchate to interact with Middle East churches after decades of isolation.

But it is not the Soviet era that the current leadership of the Moscow Patriarchate sees as a model; it is the late Imperial era.¹² As Moscow's power expanded and that of the Ottoman Empire contracted in the 18th and 19th centuries, Imperial Russia and its Orthodox Church increasingly assumed the special role of protector of the conquered Orthodox peoples. In the Levant, the ROC also assumed the role of protector of Orthodox pilgrims and the holy sites that they visited. With that function in mind, the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission was established in Jerusalem in 1847 as an outreach organ of the Church. Its head was appointed by the Holy Synod.

In 1882, to reverse what was perceived by the Russian leadership as preponderate British and French influence in the Middle East, Alexander III sanctioned, with the agreement of the Holy Synod, the establishment in St Petersburg of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society (IOPS). It was not an initiative of the Moscow Patriarchate; rather it arose from the activities of modern and well-educated members of the laity. Part of its power derived from the freedom it

had from the ecclesiastical authorities as a lay organisation. The first President of the Society was the Tsar's brother, the Grand Duke Sergei, a military man with strong religious convictions, whose record includes both supervising the expulsion of Jews from Moscow in the early 1890s and patronising many worthy humanitarian and cultural endeavours.¹³ The Society's officially declared goals were 'to strengthen Orthodoxy in the Holy Land, to help Russian visitors traveling to the Holy Land, to publish news about the Holy Land, and to promulgate it to Russians.'¹⁴ While the Society enjoyed Imperial patronage, it was financed, at first, exclusively from private sources, and was not under the jurisdiction of either the Foreign Ministry or the Holy Synod. This 19th century Russian NGO, as it would be called today, quickly became a force to be reckoned with. It attracted strong support from the upper echelons of Russian society, with local branches established across the country. Its success eventually attracted financial support from the Russian government, and a change of byelaws which enabled the Tsar to appoint the Society's Vice-President and council members representing the Foreign Ministry and the Holy Synod.

In the Levant, the IOPS was the catalyst for the Orthodox renewal that enabled Orthodoxy to start to compete with the success enjoyed by the modern Catholic and Protestant institutions supported by the French, British and Americans. This Orthodox renewal witnessed the growth of schools and teacher training, church restoration, medical facilities, archaeological exploration, and facilities for pilgrimages. One of the lasting achievements of the IOPS was to empower, through education, the Arab clergy and laity who had long been marginalised by the Greek ecclesiastical superiors. This exercise in soft power

played a crucial role in reorienting the Orthodox of the Levant away from Constantinople and towards Russia. With the Orthodox representing a large element within the Christian population of the Levant, the rise of Russian influence through the IOPS was significant.¹⁵ The Bolshevik Revolution put an end to the work of the IOPS, as well as Russian engagement with the Middle East, until the post-World War II era.

With both the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian state looking to the late Imperial era as a model for Russian regeneration in the post-Soviet world, it should not come as a surprise that the Patriarchate's policy regarding Middle East Christians is in harmony with the foreign policy of the Kremlin. After starting out in the early 1990s on an Atlanticist footing, the post-Soviet Russian leadership has moved steadily in the direction of its historic tradition of authoritarianism and Orthodoxy. Constantinianism has returned. It fills a potentially destabilising ideological void that was left by the collapse of Communism and by the failure of the secular Atlanticist experiment to secure Russia's role as a Great Power. It furthermore provides the Moscow Patriarchate with possibilities for bolstering its status as a Great Religious Power. From the point of view of the Moscow Patriarchate, the new Constantinian arrangement precludes the ideological void being filled by a post-Judeo-Christian, pagan ideology, such as Communism, National Socialism, or western materialism, or the religious-based ideology of Islamism.

My former Keston colleague, John Anderson, ably analysed in 2007 the main characteristics of this process in an enlightening article, tellingly entitled, 'Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church: Asymmetric Symphonia'.¹⁶ More recently, Professor Robert Blitt



John Eibner in a Christian cemetery vandalised by Jihadi rebels in Homs

identified the complex and well developed institutional connections that link the Moscow Patriarchate with the Russian state regarding foreign policy. A growing global network of institutions now functions as an instrument of the soft power of the church-state alliance. The Foreign Ministry's Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation provides a framework for close, mutually supportive political collaboration. This policy document declares the state's willingness to 'interact with the ROC and other main confessions of the country' and emphasises the development of soft power abroad, based on institutions promoting Russian culture and spiritual values.¹⁷

While some may assume that the old, Soviet-built, one-way transmission system, running from the Kremlin directly to the Danilov Monastery is still operational, the title of Blitt's paper 'Russia's "Orthodox" Foreign Policy: The Growing Influence of the ROC in Shaping Russia's Policies Abroad' suggests that the transmission belt moves in the opposite direction at least

some of the time. The *New York Times* suggests likewise: in 2013 it reported that Metropolitan Hilarion had persuaded Putin to throw his weight behind the policy to promote the protection of Middle Eastern Christians, while the then Prime Minister was angling for support from the ROC in his bid to regain the Presidency.¹⁸ President Putin should be pleased with the performance of the Church. It created for him a rare public relations success with the *New York Times*. But at a higher level, this kind of collaboration with the church provides his foreign policy with a moral legitimacy that Washington strives to undermine as the Cold War climate returns to chill Russo-American relations.

The vigour with which the Russian state pursues the Hilarion-inspired policy stands in stark contrast to the reluctance of Washington to address the issue of religious cleansing in the Middle East. Putin's policy also enables Russia to cultivate closer relations with the Christian communities of the Middle East, especially those that feel

alienated by Washington. As the Beirut-based political observer Nasser Chararah notes in a perceptive article in *al-Monitor*, Russia strives to create a 'backbone of Christian minorities with which it may ally', using Lebanon, with its significant Orthodox population as its 'launch pad', and it does so to counter Washington's alliance with Sunni political Islam.¹⁹

While the Moscow Patriarchate consults directly with the Russian Foreign Ministry, there is a third institution in the mix. Borrowing directly from the 19th century model, the state has revived the IOPS which joins the Moscow Patriarchate and the Foreign Ministry as the third member of an institutional triumvirate which bears responsibility for formulating and executing Orthodox policy on the Middle East. Unlike the old IOPS, the origins of the new version do not appear to be a manifestation of civil society. According to Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, it was conceived and headed in the 1990s by two Russian diplomats. Under their leadership, the organisation was legally registered in 1992 under its historic name, and acquired NGO consultative status at the UN.²⁰ Since 2012, the IOPS has been housed at 3 Zabelina Street in Moscow. This historic building was restored with state assistance, and has been made available to the IOPS for five years free of charge. The Patriarch dedicated it at the end of 2012 in the presence of the Foreign Minister.²¹

By 2007, the new IOPS, with Patriarch Kirill as Chairman of the 'Honorary Members Committee' and Foreign Minister Lavrov as an 'Honorary Member', was ready to assume a high public profile. The importance the Kremlin attached to the IOPS as an instrument of Russian soft power in a region where more heavy duty instruments were

wanted, is reflected in its leadership. The IOPS authorities appointed a political heavyweight as President. Their choice was Colonel General Sergei Vadimovich Stepashin who had held a host of top government jobs in post-



Sergei Stepashin

Soviet Russia: Director of the FSB, Justice Minister, Interior Minister, and Prime Minister, and, most recently, head of the powerful Federal Audit Chamber. As the Soviet system was collapsing, Stepashin undertook sensitive missions regarding the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. Afterwards he played a major role in crafting and executing Moscow's response to the revolts in Chechnya. Lavrov spoke euphorically about Stepashin upon his election as Chairman of the IOPS, declaring: 'With a leader of such calibre, we are capable of achieving anything.'²² At the IOPS's first conference, Stepashin identified its role in promoting Russia's Middle East policy:

'The Society should be seen as a powerful civil force in Russia, capable of uniting the nation spiritually around fundamental, clear and age-long Christian values. Today the Society is Russia's reliable spiritual and moral outpost in the Holy Land [...] It is a powerful intellectual, patriotic, spiritual, humanitarian and social force acting in common with national interests together with the ROC and as an effective

mechanism of humanitarian influence in the Middle East [...],²³

Stepashin is supported by IOPS Deputy Chairman Elena Agapova who appears to function as the IOPS's chief operating officer. Like her boss, she has a background in the Soviet military: she once served as Deputy Editor of *Red Star*, the Soviet army newspaper. During the 1990s she was the press spokesman for Defence Minister Pavel Grachev, and, as such, bore onerous re-



Elena Agapova

sponsibility for making the Chechen war and Grachev's controversial policies acceptable to the Russian public. Within the IOPS, Agapova heads a relatively new department called The Public Centre for the Protection of Christians in the Middle East and North Africa. She describes it as the research and advocacy organ of the Society.

The advocacy efforts of the Patriarchate, the IOPS and the Foreign Ministry reached a crescendo in September 2013 when all three institutions – joining many others throughout the world, including the Vatican and CSI – pulled out all stops in the effort to persuade President Obama not to launch cruise missile strikes against Syria.

To what extent the IOPS is a genuine reflection of Russian civil society, and how autonomous the Moscow Patriarchate is, are questions of interest to

statesmen and political spectators. But they are of little interest to the millions of Christians in the Middle East whose survival in their homelands is currently under threat. They are looking, with increasing desperation, for help and especially for a credible protector. This is a role that Washington is loathe to play, notwithstanding its post-Cold War political, military and economic ascendancy in the region. The vital interests of the US and its NATO allies are bound up with power configurations that promote intolerant Islamic agendas, not with existentially threatened Christian communities.

The Moscow Patriarchate and the IOPS provide welcome humanitarian aid and moral support. They also use language in their advocacy activities that is in harmony with the thinking and the spirit of most Christians in the region. But, as non-state actors without powers of coercion, they are not in a position to provide protection. They can only act as catalysts for effective political action in conjunction with powers within the international state system, as the Vatican did in collaboration with the US to help end the Cold War and free Eastern Europe from Soviet domination. But the Russian Federation, the natural ally of the Moscow Patriarchate and the IOPS, is too weak to don the mantle of a protector of Middle Eastern Christians as did the 19th century Tsars. Since the end of the Cold War, the loss of Russian influence in the Middle East mirrors the Kremlin's diminished stature in Eastern Europe. Washington-led regime change policies have effectively shut Russia out of Iraq and Libya, while imposing a heavy price on its continuing relations with the Syrian government. The absence of any sign that Russia is strong enough to restore stability to the Middle East and implement the kind of policy recommendations made by Met-

ropolitan Hilarion is a source of great despondency amongst the region's Christians.

Pessimism is not unwarranted. The 30 Years' War prophecy for the Middle East made by former CIA Director and Secretary for Defence Leon Panetta is a realistic prospect. The vulnerable Christians and other religious minorities of the region are not likely to survive three decades of religious violence. Order can only be restored, as happened to conclude the 30 Years' War, by some kind of Great Power agreement. Russia, although in decline, remains one of the Great Powers. Harvard Professor Joseph Nye recently highlighted the need for cooperation with Russia, stating:

'Designing and implementing a strategy that contains Putin's behaviour while maintaining long-term engagement with Russia is one of the most important challenges facing the international community today.'²⁴

This former Assistant Secretary of State for Defence and Chairman of the National Intelligence Council then identified a set of global issues that require long-term Russo-American cooperation, such as 'nuclear security, non-proliferation, anti-terrorism, the exploitation of the Arctic and regional

issues like Iran and Afghanistan'. The prevention of a 30 Years' War in the Middle East and the preservation of the region's religious pluralism ought to be among them, just as human rights and religious liberty were central to the Helsinki process in Europe.

Jane Ellis concluded her important book on the ROC with these visionary words:

'Whatever the political situation, and whatever the vicissitudes it has to face, it is clear that the spiritual vitality of the ROC is undimmed [...] We must expect that the largest national church in the world will continue to be a shining example of the power of the Christian faith to inspire people to overcome unprecedented persecution and suffering.'²⁵

Jane's expectation shows signs of being fulfilled in the Middle East. The once severely persecuted ROC is indeed a source of inspiration for Christians in the Middle East as they strive to overcome unprecedented persecution and suffering. This Church's acts of solidarity with the existentially threatened Christians of the Middle East represent a challenge to the secularised West and its churches. Are the western churches capable of joining the ROC as a source of such inspiration?

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