

According to a report commissioned by the British foreign secretary, Jeremy Hunt, pervasive persecution of Christians, virtually amounting to genocide, is ongoing in parts of the Middle East, and has prompted an exodus in the past twenty years. Millions of Christians in the region have been uprooted from their homes, and many have been killed, kidnapped, imprisoned, and discriminated against, the report finds.

The Justice and Development Party of the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, for instance, is highlighted for denigrating Christians. His government's conversion of Istanbul's Hagia Sophia into a mosque on Friday must be seen for what it symbolically is—a deliberate slap in the face against Christians. The 1934 decree of President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, which turned the Hagia Sophia into a museum, was intended as a symbol of peaceful religious coexistence. The rescinding of that decree is plainly saying that Islam considers peaceful religious coexistence impossible, and the facts from the entire region over the last twenty years confirms that unsettling conclusion, of which the fate of the Hagia Sophia is now a “poster child.”

Jeremy Hunt's report shows that a century ago Christians comprised 20% of the population in the Middle East and North Africa, but since then the proportion has fallen to less than 4%, or roughly 15 million people. In the Middle East and North Africa, the report says, “forms of persecution ranging from routine discrimination in education, employment and social life up to genocidal attacks against Christian communities have led to a significant exodus of Christian believers from this region since the turn of the century.

That persecution began with the genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire during the First World War, and the Greco-Turkish War that followed, in which 2.5 million Armenian, Assyrian, and Anatolian Greek Christians were killed. This is, indeed, the first major holocaust of twentieth century, but how many people have even heard of it? If you went into a classroom at Bayonne High School, for example, and asked the students if they've ever been told about it, how many hands would rise? Right up to this very day, the government of Turkey has never acknowledged the genocide, let alone apologize for it or made any attempt at restitution, in stark contrast to how Germany has handled its responsibility, and guilt, for the Jewish Holocaust of the Second World War. Friday's conversion of the Hagia Sophia shows that most Turks, and most Muslims in general, feel utterly no contrition for the dislocation and deaths of Christians at their hands, either in the past, or today.

Today, in countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, the situation of Christians and other minorities has reached an alarming stage. In Saudi Arabia there are strict limitations on all forms of expression of Christianity including public acts of worship. There have been regular crackdowns on private Christian services. The Arab-Israeli conflict has caused the majority of Palestinian Christians to leave their homeland. The population of Palestinian Christians has dropped from 15% to 2%. The population of Bethlehem, for example, was 85% Christian in 1947; today it is only 16%. Another example I can give you is that of the near extinction of Christianity in Iraq. Since the US-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, the Christian community had dwindled by 83%, from about 1.5 million to just 250,000. Says Archbishop Bashar Warda of Irbil, in a BBC interview last year, “Christianity in Iraq, one of the world's oldest Churches, is perilously close to extinction. Those of us who remain must be ready to face martyrdom.”

Hunt's report identifies three drivers of persecution: political failure creating a fertile ground for religious extremism; a turn to religious conservatism in countries such as Algeria and Turkey; and institutional weaknesses around justice, the rule of law, and policing, leaving the system open to exploitation by extremists. The report says: “The rise of hate speech against Christians in state media and by religious leaders, especially in countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia, has compromised the safety of Christians and created social intolerance.” In countries such as Iran, Algeria and Qatar, the state is the main actor, where as in Syria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Egypt, both state and non-state actors, especially religious extremist groups, are implicated.” For example, “In 2017 a total of 99 Egyptian Christians were killed by extremist groups, with 47 killed on Palm Sunday in Tanta and Alexandria. Egyptian Christians were continuously targeted by extremist groups during 2017 and 2018. Egypt's Copts, who constitute at least 10% of the country's 100 million population, have come under sustained attack from jihadists who have bombed their churches and attempted to drive them out of northern Sinai.

The report continues: “Arrest, detention and imprisonment are common in Iran, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. For example, in the course of six days before Christmas 2018, 114 Christians were arrested in Iran with court cases left pending as a form of intimidation. Though most cases in Iran involve converts, indigenous Assyrian Christians have also been targeted and imprisoned.” It also highlights how states, and state-sponsored social media, sometimes incite hatred and publish propaganda against Christians, especially in Iran, Iraq and Turkey. “The governing Justice and Development Party in Turkey depicts Christians as a ‘threat to the stability of the nation’. Turkish Christian citizens have often been stereotyped as not real Turks but as western collaborators.” In Saudi Arabia, school textbooks “teach pupils religious hatred and intolerance towards non-Muslims, including Christians and Jews.”

Defending the claim of genocide, the report says: “The level and nature of persecution is arguably coming close to meeting the international definition of genocide, according to that adopted by the UN.” The eradication of Christians and other minorities on pain of “the sword” or other violent means was revealed to be the specific and stated objective of extremist groups throughout the Middle East. An intent to erase all evidence of the Christian presence was made plain by the removal of crosses, the destruction of church buildings and other church symbols. “The killing and abduction of clergy represented a direct attack on the church’s structure and leadership. Where these and other incidents meet the tests of genocide, governments will be required to bring perpetrators to justice, aid victims, and take preventative measures for the future. The main impact of such genocidal acts against Christians is exodus.”

Referring to the universal declaration of human rights, Hunt’s report concludes: “The challenge that faces us at the beginning of the 21st century is not that we need to fight for a just legal system, it is rather that to our shame, we have abjectly failed to implement the best system that women and men have yet devised to protect universal freedoms.” And, furthermore, “The inconvenient truth is that the overwhelming majority (80%) of persecuted religious believers in the world are Christians.”

Yet Western leaders rarely condemn extremism against Christians for fear of being accused of Islamophobia ... i.e. doing so simply isn’t “politically correct.” Will the Western democracies continue to condone this never-ending, organized persecution against Christians in the Middle East, and elsewhere around the world? When the next wave of violence begins, will anyone on our campuses hold demonstrations and carry signs that say ‘We are all Christians’ or march in the streets chanting ‘Christian lives matter’? Let us make July 24, 2020 the date that we drew the line ... that we will no longer passively disregard the suffering of the Christians of the Middle East ... that we got President Erdogan’s message – Islam will not peacefully coexist with us and it is way past time to denounce the genocide being perpetrated against us. I think we, as individuals, can make a symbolic start by immediately boycotting all products imported from Turkey.