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## MINORITY RESILIENCE AND VULNERABILITY: ARMENIAN CHRISTIAN VILLAGES IN ARAB AND KURDISH CONTEXTS

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The primary objective of the article is to examine the current realities of cultural survival and the key challenges, particularly those related to security, facing Armenian Christian communities in rural areas of Arab countries. It explores how a complex interplay of historical legacies and contemporary geopolitical and sociopolitical developments has shaped these challenges. Positioning the Armenian case within the broader context of Christianity's decline in the Middle East, the study argues that the difficulties faced by Armenian communities are deeply intertwined with Christianity's decline across the region. Special attention is given to how these challenges manifest and diverge across Middle Eastern sociocultural settings, offering a comparative framework for understanding their specific dynamics. By focusing on rural communities, the article aims to illuminate both the unique characteristics of rural Armenian life and the shared experiences of rural and urban Armenian populations in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. This focus enables a nuanced analysis of the vulnerabilities, resilience, and adaptive strategies of minority communities navigating diverse socio-political and cultural landscapes, including both Arab Muslim and Kurdish contexts. The study focuses on four Armenian rural settlements that continue to exist today: Kessab in Syria, Anjar in Lebanon, and Hawrezq and Avzrook in Iraqi Kurdistan. The study reveals that social and political transformations, armed conflicts, and episodes of violence in the region have adversely affected the demographic composition of Armenian rural settlements, weakening these communities and fostering a sense of uncertainty and despair about their future. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, Armenian identity within these rural areas has remained resilient, and the local Armenian communities continue to sustain a dynamic and vibrant national and cultural life.

**Keywords:** Anjar; Armenian communities; Avzrook; Christians; Hawrezk; Kessab; Middle East; identity; rural areas; security

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### **Introduction**

Historically, Armenian communities in the Arab countries of the Middle East have undergone profound transformations shaped by a complex interplay of internal dynamics and broader geopolitical forces. Since the First World War, these communities have experienced substantial changes in their social, cultural, and institutional structures, reflecting both the challenges of displacement and the processes of adaptation within diverse host societies. Following the 1915 Armenian tragedy in the Ottoman Empire, the mass influx of Armenian refugees into various Arab countries, most notably into Syria, contributed to the formation and consolidation of Armenian communities. It is noteworthy that in several Arab cities and settlements, particularly in Aleppo, also in Beirut and Jerusalem, there already existed Arabic-speaking Armenians, who were mostly Catholic and, to a lesser extent, Orthodox. Some of them later became integrated into the newly established Armenian communal circles, dominated by genocide survivor-refugees, while others remained on the margins of this renewed Armenian community life [Sanjian 2025].

Within this broader historical trajectory, rural Armenian settlements occupy a particularly distinctive place, often serving as strongholds of traditional customs, language, and religious practices. Among the most notable Armenian rural communities in the historical region of Cilicia are Musa Dagh<sup>1</sup> and Kessab. These communities have long stood as enduring symbols of resilience and cultural continuity, preserving Armenian identity amid conflict and displacement. During the First World War, these areas comprising several ethnically Armenian villages, were situated within the Sanjak of Alexandretta (İskenderun), a district administered as part of the Aleppo Vilayet of the Ottoman Empire. Following the collapse of Ottoman rule after the war, the Sanjak of Alexandretta was placed under the authority of the French Mandate for Syria (1920–1946), initiating a period of significant political and social transformation in the region. In accordance with the Franco-Turkish Treaty of Friendship and amidst increasing geopolitical pressure and complex regional dynamics, French authorities unilaterally transferred administrative control of the Sanjak to Turkey on July 4, 1938. One year later, the territory was formally incorporated into the Republic of Turkey as part of the newly established Hatay Province, marking a definitive reconfiguration of sovereignty and territorial governance [Sanjian 1956, 381]. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the French authorities facilitated the establishment of Anjar in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley as a rural settlement modelled after the administrative divisions of Musa Dagh [Shemmajian 2015, 129–131]. It was intended to provide refuge and a sense of continuity for the Armenians who, refusing to remain within Turkey, were displaced from Musa Dagh and resettled in Anjar. In their new homeland, the community preserved much of its cultural and religious heritage while forging a new life shaped by the shared memory of their past [see in detail in: Shemmajian 2017].

It is noteworthy that Kessab, although originally part of the Sanjak of Alexandretta, was ultimately detached from it and remained within the French Mandate of Syria, later becoming part of the Syrian Arab Republic. Within Armenian circles, including those in Kessab itself, and particularly among Armenian Catholic communities, there exists a commonly held belief that Gregorio Pietro XV Agagianian, the Armenian cardinal of the Catholic Church, played a decisive role in securing this outcome. However, this assertion remains unverified, as no historical evidence has been found to substantiate such involvement [Sanjian 2025]. There were other rural settlements in Syria where Armenians had lived since ancient times, including Aramo (in the present-day Latakia Governorate), as well as al-Yacoubiyah, al-Qunaya, and Ghnemieh (in the present-day Idlib Governorate). Following the outbreak of the Syrian crisis (2011–2024), Armenians were forced to leave these villages as violence and instability spread across the region. Only years later, the bells of St. Anna's Church in Yacoubiyah, a predominantly Armenian Christian village in northwestern Idlib, rang out again. Its reopening was marked with the annual Feast of

St. Anna, a significant celebration in the Armenian Orthodox calendar that attracts pilgrims from across Syria and beyond [Syriacpress 2025b].

After 1915, new rural Armenian settlements such as Hawrezk (also spelled *Havresk*) and Avzrook (*Avzrog Miri*), were established in Iraqi Kurdistan during the late 1920s and early 1930s. These villages not only provided refuge for survivors but also evolved into vibrant centres of community life, complete with churches, schools, and local administrative structures. Despite experiencing episodes of forced displacement, most notably in 1975 under Saddam Hussein, and periods of destruction, both villages were later repopulated and reconstructed with the support of the Kurdistan Regional Government beginning in the mid-2000s [Kotchikian 2016]. Their development highlights how rural Armenian communities have persisted by rebuilding institutions and preserving their cultural identity in shifting geopolitical contexts.

Overall, since the Second World War which coincided with the Arab countries' struggle for independence, Armenian communities in the region have faced a series of internal and external challenges that have significantly shaped their historical trajectory. Among these were the waves of repatriation to Soviet Armenia [Sanjian 2023] and the successive regional conflicts, most notably the Arab–Israeli, that unfolded across the Middle East. In addition, substantial migration occurred toward the Gulf states, driven primarily by the economic opportunities generated by the rapid expansion of the oil industry [Harutyunyan, Pashayan 2012, 141–142]. According to Hratch Tchilingirian, a scholar specialising in Armenian diaspora studies, the combined Armenian population in Middle Eastern countries, including Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Israel/Palestine, Jordan, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates, was approximately 625,000 in 1975. Nevertheless, by 2022, this number had decreased to an estimated 200,000 [Tchilingirian 2023, 13–14]. Wars, civil conflicts, and socio-economic crises played a role in prompting Armenian migration to the United States, Canada, Western Europe, and even Australia in the Cold War, post-Cold War and modern period [Katerjian 2025]. Meanwhile, both the number of Armenian schools and student enrollment have declined sharply, reflecting the broader historical demographic decrease of Armenian communities across the Middle East [Nalbandian 2025].

The security dynamics and confessional composition of the contemporary Middle East underwent profound and enduring transformations following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. During this period, the Middle East witnessed the emergence of sectarian violence in Iraq, characterized by the rise of Sunni jihadist militant groups, demonstrating pronounced antagonism not only toward Christian communities but also toward Shi'a populations [Ghobadzdeh, Akbarzadeh 2015, 692]. The events of the “Arab Spring” and the subsequent rise and territorial expansion of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014 marked a second wave of de-Christianization in the region, following the Iraqi crisis of 2003 and its aftermath [ARVAK Center 2025]. These developments led to widespread persecution, mass displacement, and the gradual decline of ancient Christian communities across the region, including the Armenians [Nicolas 2016, 10]. Following ISIS's capture of Mosul in June 2014 and the destruction of the Armenian church in Mosul, Armenian families left the city [Armenpress 2014a]. Thousands of Armenians from various Iraqi cities have begun leaving the country [Pashayan 2010].

In addition, other indigenous Christian groups, including Assyrians, have undergone substantial emigration, thereby accelerating the erosion of the Christian demographic presence across the region [Haider 2017, 6–7]. The crisis that began in Syria in 2011 posed serious challenges not only for Syrian citizens in general, but especially for Christians, as the anti-government radical militant forces held a distinctly anti-Christian stance [Khashan 2014]. On September 21, 2014, Armenia's Independence Day, the Armenian Church of the Martyrs in Deir ez-Zor was destroyed by ISIS, who took responsibility [World Council of Churches 2014]. In response to the incident, Armenia condemned it

and called on the international community to address the issue [Ministry of Foreign Affairs... 2014]. This event marked a further deterioration of the situation for Armenians in Syria. The Armenian community of Aleppo, often regarded as the diaspora's cultural and historical capital, endured severe hardships, both in terms of material losses and demographic decline. It is crucial to consider the future, acknowledging that a life without Aleppo would be profoundly detrimental, indeed, nearly impossible [Vardanyan 2024, 73]. Armenian populations in other Syrian localities, including Damascus, Kessab, Latakia, and Qamishli, faced security challenges. As a result of the Syrian war, more than 60,000 Armenians were forced to leave Syria. Today, approximately 30,000 Armenians remain in the country, the majority of whom reside in Aleppo. Since the onset of the conflict, Armenia has received around 25,000 Syrian Armenians seeking refuge [Diaspora Affairs of RA n.d.]. The overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024 did not contribute to the total stabilization of the situation in the country or to the final neutralization of security threats.

Despite being the historical cradle of Christianity, the Middle East no longer offers a stable or secure environment for its Christian communities. The Christian population across the region continues to decline steadily [Conrad et al. 2025]. Although emigration of Christians from the Middle East is not a new phenomenon, it was historically motivated more by economic and social factors than by religious persecution. Today, however, Armenians and other Christian groups face an increasingly complex set of interrelated challenges. Among the most urgent are worsening security conditions, compounded by persistent socio-economic hardships and deep-rooted political instability. According to Arshak Poladyan, the former Armenian Ambassador to Syria (2007–2018), Armenians have historically been a vital part of the Middle East's diverse ethno-religious landscape. Despite numerous challenges, the Armenian community should strive to engage positively and constructively with various confessional groups. Additionally, the presence of Armenian communities in Arab countries plays a significant role in strengthening relations between Armenia and these nations. Following the collapse of the USSR, these communities have acted as a bridge, fostering these important connections [Poladyan 2025].

### ***Methodology and Analytical Framework***

The study employs a qualitative case study approach to explore the present situation, existential challenges, and future perspectives of Christian Armenian rural communities situated within predominantly Arab Muslim and Kurdish environments. The primary focus is on four localities in Lebanon and Syria, as well as Iraqi Kurdistan. These cases were selected for their shared characteristics – rurality, minority Christian identity, and a long-standing Armenian presence – as well as for their exposure to regional pressures linked to political instability, migration, and regional transformations. These populations are distinguished by their deep-rooted commitment to Armenian heritage, shared cultural practices, the use of a distinct regional dialect markedly different from standard literary Western and Eastern Armenian, and the continued observance of traditional rituals such as *harissa*<sup>2</sup>.

The research is grounded in oral history methodology, encompassing interviews conducted at various times with academicians, diplomats who served in Syria, and community members both within and outside Armenian communities. These interviews provide first-hand accounts of how individuals and communities perceive their present circumstances, navigate challenges, and envision their future within shifting demographic and political landscapes. Expert interviews further enrich the study, offering critical insights that help fill gaps in the existing scholarly literature. While the study prioritizes empirical, field-based perspectives, it also draws on academic literature and media reports concerning the history, identity, and contemporary dynamics of Armenian communities in the Arab world and Iraqi Kurdistan. Several key patterns were identified across the case

studies: perceived erosion of community safety and trust, often linked to political instability or increasing insecurity; pressure of emigration and demographic decline, experienced as an existential threat to the community's continuity; deeply rooted sense of place and heritage, expressed through attachment to land, language, and religious life; burden of symbolic representation, as communities navigate expectations associated with their Christian and Armenian identities in Muslim-majority contexts; survival through strategic withdrawal or low visibility, employed to avoid conflict or external scrutiny; continuity through adaptation. By foregrounding everyday experiences and local interpretations, the research contributes to a nuanced understanding of how Armenian Christian communities maintain resilience amid long-term structural and social transformations.

### ***The Legal and Religious Status of Armenian Communities in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq***

The legal recognition and status of Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholic, and Armenian Evangelical communities in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq vary in accordance with each country's constitutional and legal framework regarding religious and ethnic minorities. In Syria [ConstitutionNet], Lebanon [The Rights of Religious Minorities... 2025] and Iraq [Constitute 2005], the constitutions did not explicitly name Armenians. Still, they recognized the freedom of religion and the right of religious communities to manage personal status and spiritual affairs. This recognition enabled the Armenian community to maintain its religious institutions, schools, and cultural associations. While Armenians hold full citizenship in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, their social and legal recognition remains primarily defined through the lens of religious minority status. This classification is historically grounded in the Ottoman millet system, which structured society along confessional lines and granted religious communities a degree of internal autonomy [Migliorino 2008, 12–13]. The Church functions as an intermediary institution, representing the community in its interactions with the state, and conversely, conveying state matters to the community. It plays a central role in the social and cultural life of Armenians, actively supporting the preservation of Armenian identity through its close collaboration with cultural, educational, sports and charitable organizations [Jebejian 2025]. In the countries above, Armenian national institutions, particularly those operating under the Church's umbrella, have historically played a vital role in preserving Armenian national identity, culture, and language amid complex socio-political environments. Those who are connected to community life have direct contact and interaction with the Armenian Church [Bagdoyan 2025].

Although Syria's constitution formally guaranteed freedom of expression, political pluralism, and the rights to assembly and association, these freedoms were largely absent in practice, and political parties were effectively prohibited under the al-Assad regime (1971–2024) [ConstitutionNet]. Therefore, the traditional Armenian political parties in Syria operated through their non-political branches. After coming to power in December 2024, the Syrian leadership under Ahmad al-Sharaa took steps to recognize the rights of religious and ethnic minorities [Al Jazeera 2024]. The Armenian community in Syria under the Islamist regime largely maintains the patterns and social logic established during the Assad era; however, concerns over security, the preservation of cultural and national identity, and long-term prospects have grown significantly.

In Lebanon, Armenians enjoy a constitutionally guaranteed and well-established legal and political presence [The Lebanese Constitution]. Political activities and parties are not prohibited or forbidden. Consequently, the traditional Armenian parties have both political and cultural branches in Lebanon, including Anjar. The Lebanese confessional system formally allocates political representation along sectarian lines, and the Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholic, and Armenian Evangelical communities are each recognized

and granted parliamentary seats and communal autonomy in matters of religion, education, and personal status [Papkova 2014, 171–172].

According to Article 4 of the Iraqi Constitution, Arabic and Kurdish are the official languages of Iraq, while three other languages, Turkish, Neo-Aramaic, and Armenian, are recognized as minority languages [Ministry of Justice, Iraq 2019]. The Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq has generally maintained a positive and respectful relationship with the Armenian community living within its territory, particularly in and around Erbil, Duhok, and Zakho. Armenians are allowed to operate community schools and churches [Yegavian 2023]. Additionally, Armenians have been allocated one reserved seat in the Parliament of Iraqi Kurdistan [Kurdistan Parliament 2025]. Compared to other parts of Iraq, the Kurdistan Region has been a haven for Armenians (and other minorities) during periods of conflict, particularly after the rise of ISIS. Many Armenians from Mosul and Baghdad fled to Kurdistan during times of sectarian violence [Logan 2010, 148].

***At the Edge of Survival: The Armenians of Kessab, Security Challenges, and the Endurance of Identity***

Kessab has long been recognized as one of the most significant rural centres of Armenian life in the Syrian context. It is a historically substantial Armenian town with roots dating back to the era of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia. Many Armenians saw it as the last remaining bit of historical Western Armenia, in what is today Eastern and South-Eastern Turkey, home to millions of Armenians before 1915 [Zolyan 2014]. According to the 1914 census, Kessab and its surrounding villages had a population of 9,000. In 1915, the majority of the Armenian population of Kessab was deported to Deir ez-Zor, with only approximately 2,200–2,300 individuals eventually returning to the town. Before the Syrian war, the town had 2,000 inhabitants [Mollica, Hakobyan 2021, 209–210]. The town is encircled by several small villages and agricultural settlements, predominantly Armenian in population. Kessab comprises 12 villages, including the townships of Kessab, Duzaghaj, Esguran, Sev Aghpyur, Chinar, Chakhajekh, Keorkeuna, Ekizolukh, Upper and Lower Baghjaghaz, Karadouran, Karadash, and the now-abandoned village of Bashurd. The town and its surrounding villages are situated in a mountainous, forested region overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. This relative geographical isolation contributed to the preservation of Armenian cultural and linguistic traditions.

The population of Kessab is predominantly Armenian. Most Armenians are followers of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Still, there are Catholic and Protestant communities, which likewise play a significant role in community life and in the preservation of national identity [Syriacpress 2025a]. In Kessab, Armenian communities continue to maintain their own institutions encompassing both religious and secular spheres. At present, only three churches remain active: the Holy Mother of God Armenian Apostolic Church, the Holy Trinity Armenian Evangelical Church, and the Holy Michael Armenian Catholic Church. The town also has a local Armenian autonomous administration, which oversees community affairs and supports the preservation of cultural and social life [Horizon Weekly 2014]. Prior to the outbreak of the Syrian war in 2011, agriculture, tourism, and diaspora visits constituted essential pillars of the local economy. In the early 1970s, a Sunni Mosque was constructed in Kessab, generating a degree of concern among the local Armenian population, as the village was predominantly inhabited by Christian Armenians and could be considered largely Armenian. Strategically positioned at the village entrance, directly opposite the Armenian Evangelical Church, the mosque's construction was driven primarily by political considerations. Upon assuming power in the 1970s, Hafez al-Assad, an Alawite leader, sought to consolidate broader legitimacy across Syrian Muslim society. Within this context, the establishment of the mosque in Kessab reflected the wider objectives of the Ba'ath Party. From another perspective, particularly in relation to the development of tourism in Kessab, the mosque also served a strategic

function: it facilitated the influx of visitors from Gulf Arab countries, leveraging the town's natural beauty and cultural heritage to enhance its appeal as a tourist destination [Jebejian 2025]. Another persistent concern among the Armenians of Kessab has been the fear that Armenian-owned lands might be sold to non-Armenians. Despite these apprehensions, some local Armenians have sold property to Muslims, both within and outside the community. Furthermore, a small Alawite community has established itself in the town and participates in various economic and social activities [Yazichian 2025]. In an interview, historian K. Yazichian, who resided in Kessab for several years, recalled that during his work in the town in 2005, a local Muslim man remarked that, sooner or later, the Armenians would have to leave Kessab and the surrounding region, particularly in light of the existence of the Republic of Armenia as an independent state. This account suggests that intolerance toward Christians, including Armenians, did not emerge solely since 2011 but had been developing over many years prior [Yazichian 2025].

What ultimately posed a far greater threat to the Armenian presence in Kessab was the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011. The conflict introduced unprecedented instability and insecurity, with consequences for the community far more severe than those of any previous demographic concerns. During the Syrian war, the position of the Armenian community was perceived as pro-Assad. However, Armenians adopted a stance of positive neutrality and were never directly involved in military operations unless it was related to self-defence [Hovyan 2013]. Three years later, on March 21, 2014, radical Islamist militant groups, Jabhat al-Nusra and Jaish al-Islam, launched a coordinated assault on Kessab from eight positions along the Turkish border [Lucas 2014]. In the wake of the attack, the Armenian population of Kessab was compelled to flee, with the intention of finding shelter primarily in Latakia, as well as in Anjar, Lebanon, and Vakifli, Samandağ district [Armenpress 2014b]. Vakifli represents the only surviving Armenian village in Turkey, out of the thousands of Armenian villages, towns, and cities that existed in the region prior to the events of 1915 [Yackley 2018]. Rebels burned down churches and destroyed graves, schools, and national institutions; nearly all the homes and buildings were looted in Kessab [Semerjian 2014]. All the churches were damaged during the 2014 onslaught but have since been renovated. There were also victims, including young people [Sherlock 2015]. The atrocities once again focused international attention on Syria. On the global stage, the “Save Kessab” movement emerged, with active involvement from Armenian lobbying organizations, including the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA) [Cheterian 2014]. What worried the Armenians was the intervention of the Turkish government, since Kessab was surrounded by Turkmen populations who could, and indeed did, provide support to the jihadist groups [Mollica, Hakobyan 2021, 224]. Syrian Armenians perceive Turkey's involvement in the Syrian war as a continuation of historical trauma of 1915, and blurs the line between past and present persecution [Hakobyan, Mollica 2021, 36–37]. Most of the Kessab Armenians remained displaced for approximately three months before limited returns became possible. The Syrian army liberated Kessab on June 15, 2014 [Public Radio of Armenia 2014]. Although most of the population eventually returned to Kessab, emigration has increased since then. After returning to Kessab, the residents began to repair what had been destroyed. Life soon returned to normal, and the national institutions were also restored [Saghdejian 2024].

At present, the Armenian Apostolic, Catholic, and Evangelical communities and institutions are functioning. All of them have large memberships and wield considerable influence. Each of the three churches is also associated with an educational institution<sup>3</sup>. The Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), Armenian Educational and Cultural Society – Hamazkayin, and the Armenian Red Cross Society of Syria operate in the area. The Armenian General Athletic Union, Homenetmen, specifically its marching band, is active in Kessab. Additionally, the Evangelical community operates youth and teen organisations known as “Janits”. It is worth noting that the following schools currently operate

in Kessab: United National School of the Armenian Apostolic community, the School of the Armenian Catholic community Barehouso, the United Martyrs' School of the Armenian Evangelical community, and the National Sahakian Hall, which hosts a Sunday school [Ashekian 2025]. Kessab has a municipal council, and its current mayor, Vazgen Chaparian, has been instrumental in supporting the community's everyday life. His efforts were widely recognized in 2014 for their impact in aiding displaced residents and preserving community cohesion [Saghdejian 2024]. Until the period of political transition in Syria following the events of 2014, the Armenian community's life in Kessab continued essentially unchanged, aside from the socio-economic and other difficulties that affected the Syrian population. Churches, schools, and kindergartens continued to operate without interruption [Ashekian 2024].

New concerns in Kessab intensified, particularly when *Jabhat al-Nusra* came to power in Syria following the fall of the al-Assad regime on December 8, 2024. The Armenians exercised caution and restraint, fearing that the rise of Islamist factions to power would pose significant threats to their safety [Jebejian 2025]. This concern was tragically validated by the Alawite massacres in Syria's coastal region in March 2025, following the rise to power of Ahmad al-Sharaa [Amnesty International 2025]. Shortly after the change in power, the Armenians of Kessab received assurances of security from representatives of the new authorities. Evidence of this can be found in materials published on social media, and in the press regarding the visit of Islamists to Kessab on December 10. It becomes clear from the video that negotiators met with the leaders of both religious and civil institutions at the Holy Mother of God Church, and brought cookies. They stated that weapons should be laid down and emphasized the importance of peaceful coexistence. Almost no one has left Kessab since the regime change in Syria [Radio Liberty 2024]. In any case, Syrian Armenian official circles, through their Facebook pages, for example, Kantsasar<sup>4</sup>, were posting important announcements about ongoing processes and the agreements reached within those circles.

Nevertheless, Kessab is a Christian enclave where the security situation can change at any moment, as it did for the Alawites in March 2025. Shogher Ashekian, an intellectual from Kessab and a dedicated researcher of Armenian communities in Arab countries, notes that a strong Armenian identity distinguishes those who live in Kessab and have no desire to leave their town. She noted that although around one thousand people currently live in Kessab, the Armenians have not lost hope for the future [Ashekian 2024]. Salpy Saghdejian, a former Kessab resident and editor of a Diaspora magazine, currently residing in Yerevan, noted in a conversation with us that young people typically remain in Kessab until around age 18 [Saghdejian 2024]. This indicates that Kessab is also undergoing demographic aging. Afterward, they tend to migrate to Gulf countries, Canada, the United States, Europe, and other regions to pursue higher education and employment opportunities. Consequently, only the elderly population remain in Kessab, resulting in a demographic shift characterized by an ageing community. Salpy's family currently lives in Kessab, but Salpy has been unable to visit them due to security concerns. Maria Ashekian, a Master's student at the Faculty of Oriental Studies at Yerevan State University, was more pessimistic during our conversation. She mentioned that she has not been able to visit her family for a long time because of security concerns and stated that Armenians have no future in Kessab until the security situation is stabilized. The people of Kessab once again have the opportunity to engage in agriculture, crafts, hotel management, and various other businesses [Ashekian 2025].

Currently, no force can guarantee the security of Kessab; hence, the Armenian local authorities of the town must demonstrate flexibility amid the ongoing turbulence in Syria to maintain at least a stable security situation. In a YouTube interview, Hagop Cholakian, a prominent Armenian intellectual of Kessab origin currently residing in Yerevan,

emphasizes that the people of Kessab (Kessabtzi) have never regarded Kessab as a foreign land. Instead, they consider it part of Armenian territory and an integral component of historical Armenian Cilicia. In other words, although they live within the borders of modern-day Syria, the Armenians of Kessab perceive themselves as belonging to historical Armenia and view Kessab as the heartland of their ancestral heritage<sup>5</sup>. Shoghag Apelian-Ayanian, a teacher in Armenian Sunday school of Kessab origins living in the United Arab Emirates, told us that although many live far from Kessab, a strong emotional connection to their homeland always remains [Apelian-Ayanian 2024]. Notably, while Armenians maintain their national traditions even outside Kessab, unlike many Shi'a and Sunni communities in the region, who, in numerous cases, remain, despite various hardships, attached to their ancestral villages, Armenians seem to be more inclined to emigrate. This is also evidenced by the decline in the Armenian population in Kessab and elsewhere in Syria in recent years [Sanjian 2025].

***An Armenian Enclave in Lebanon:  
Anjar's Enduring Identity amid National Turmoil***

Anjar is a predominantly Armenian town situated in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley, near the border with Syria, within the Zahlé district. Established at the end of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s for Armenian refugees fleeing the French-administered region of Musa Dagh, Anjar stands as a unique example of a fully developed Armenian settlement in the Middle East. The town was carefully planned and constructed through the collaboration of the French Mandate authorities and Armenian institutions to provide a permanent home for displaced families. Today, Anjar is home primarily to members of the Armenian Apostolic Church, with smaller communities of Armenian Catholics and Evangelicals [Khoshian 2024]. The town is notable for its cohesive community structure, Armenian-language education, cultural and sports organizations. Armenian identity is strongly preserved through language, traditions, and a low rate of intermarriage. Anjar also holds archaeological significance due to its well-preserved Umayyad ruins, making it not only a cultural centre for Armenians but also a national heritage site in Lebanon. According to Dr. Khajag Aintabian, a Beirut-based physician who regularly returns to Anjar on weekends, such threats are not currently evident. Despite the country's economic and political challenges, Anjar remains a symbol of Armenian resilience, cultural preservation, and communal solidarity within the Lebanese context [Aintabian 2025].

During the period of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) and the post-war years up to the present day, all marked by complex dynamics and numerous cross-border risks, local residents, particularly the youth, have played a crucial role in safeguarding and maintaining community security, often in coordination with local institutions and communal structures [Aintabian 2025].

Anjar represents a particularly compelling case in the study of Armenian rural towns within the Lebanese context. Not only does it actively preserve its distinct national and cultural identity, but it also exercises a notable degree of administrative autonomy. Located in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, Anjar functions as an Armenian enclave with entirely Armenian local governance, making it a unique example within a broader national framework [Aintabian 2025]. In Anjar, the local population adopts a cautious stance toward outsiders—not only foreigners but also Armenians from outside the village, including those of Musa Dagh descent. Villagers closely monitor, for instance, who purchases property in the community, assessing whether the buyer is “one of us” and whether he is considered trustworthy. This vigilance reflects a broader desire for social and cultural security, as locals are reluctant to allow non-Armenians to acquire property in the village. In an interview, Beirut-based Armenian Alina Dakessian recalled that when she and her husband purchased a summer house in Anjar, it took considerable time for the residents to extend

their trust and develop a rapport with them [Dakessian Alina 2025]. In an interview, Lebanese-Armenian community expert Antranik Dakessian observed that such cautiousness is not unique to Armenian settlements, including Anjar, but reflects a broader pattern across Lebanon. Comparable behaviors are evident, for instance, within the Druze community of Lebanon, and other religious and ethnically defined groups, highlighting the role of social cohesion and communal trust in the country's diverse local contexts [Dakessian Antranik 2025].

Anjar has a municipal council composed of 12 members and a mayor, elected internally by the council members. The current mayor is Setrag Havatian. Most of the community members are followers of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Most of the population is sympathisers or members of the ARF (Armenian Revolutionary Federation). ARF is the primary party operating in the town. "Red Mountain" committee handles internal issues [Aintabian 2025].

The Armenian Apostolic, Catholic, and Evangelical communities cooperate and hold annual joint events, such as Vardanants, May 28 Independence Day, and the Musa Dagh celebration [Chanpazian 2023]. In a conversation with us, Hovhannes Khoshian, a former teacher and resident of Anjar, explained that the Armenian Catholic community celebrates the Feast of the Holy Mother of God. At the same time, the Armenian Apostolic Church observes the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (*Khachverats*). He says that the Catholic community in Anjar is served by its lycée and various organisations, including the People's Council, the Union of Church-loving Ladies, the Armenian Catholic Youth Union, and the Heboyan Choir [Khoshian 2024]. The Armenian Evangelical Church of Anjar was established in 1939. Adjacent to the church are the operational Women's Union, Christian "Janit" youth, and youth associations. The Armenian Evangelical Secondary School of Anjar has achieved national and international recognition. Former teacher in Anjar H. Khoshian stated that the Armenian population in Anjar during the summer, when residents of Beirut visit the town, reaches 5,000–5,500. During winter, he says, the number decreases to 2,600–2,700 [Khoshian 2024]. The primary issue in the village is ageing and security issues [Aintabian 2025].

Near Anjar are several Arab villages with predominantly Sunni Muslim populations. Approximately 18 kilometers away lies Zahlé, a major regional center of around 150,000 inhabitants, predominantly populated by Christian communities, including Greek Catholics, Greek Orthodox, and Maronites. According to Mayor Setrag Havatian, Anjar places particular emphasis on maintaining constructive ties with surrounding communities, enabling the peaceful and timely resolution of potential issues. He highlighted the role of shared social and cultural interactions in strengthening mutual understanding. Reflecting on Lebanon's past, he emphasized that the civil war—largely driven by sectarian divisions—demonstrated the importance of sustaining strong intercommunal relations [The California Courier 2026].

Havatian further stressed that Armenians in Anjar view themselves as guests in Lebanon and therefore prioritize mutual respect in their relations with others. He added that this attitude is reciprocated, noting that Armenians are widely respected by neighboring communities for their contributions and values [The California Courier 2026].

Nevertheless, security remains a major concern for Anjar. Since taking office on January 9, 2025, President Joseph Aoun has prioritized restructuring Lebanon's security forces, with a particular focus on strengthening border controls along the Lebanon-Syria frontier. This frontier passes through the Beqaa Valley, a strategically important region that directly impacts the security situation in Anjar [The Levant Studies Unit 2025]. Should Lebanon achieve broader political and economic stability, Anjar, already one of the country's most popular tourist destinations, has strong potential for revitalization. Such developments could help curb youth emigration by offering greater economic and social opportunities within the village itself.

***Armenian Villages in Iraqi Kurdistan:  
Contemporary Trends and Viable Strategies***

Armenians have inhabited Mesopotamia, particularly northern Iraq, since the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, forming cooperative relationships with various local peoples, including the Kurds [Logan 2010, 145]. Kurdish speakers who lived across the various areas of Iraqi Kurdistan, including rural residents, were distinguished by their high integration into the Kurdish cultural environment, whereas the urban population, mainly Armenian-speaking, was less integrated. Before 2003, there were approximately 18,000 to 20,000 Armenians living in Iraq [Logan 2010, 146]. After the fall of Saddam Hussein, many Armenian-speaking and urban Armenians from Baghdad, Mosul, Kirkuk, and Basra relocated to Iraqi Kurdistan, seeking safety in the region [Logan 2010, 153].

In 2003, the Iraqi Armenian community faced considerable challenges because of the American-led invasion and the subsequent deterioration of security across the country. Before this, Armenians were primarily concentrated in major urban centers such as Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, Baqubah, Erbil, and Kirkuk, among others, regions that held considerable historical and cultural significance for the Armenian population in Iraq [Aghpashian 2021]. However, many individual Armenian settlements across Iraq lost their significance or experienced a considerable decline in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion.

In response to these challenges, certain Armenian sub-communities, particularly in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, witnessed a degree of revitalization. A major turning point occurred in 2014 when the city of Mosul fell under the control of ISIS. The ensuing violence, including the destruction of churches and their conversion into mosques, led to the displacement of the remaining Armenian population. Armenians had fled Mosul before the city's capture. For security reasons, some people relocated to Iraqi Kurdistan. In contrast, many others from major cities, including Baghdad, left for Western Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, and the Republic of Armenia. The majority of Iraqi Armenians who settled in Armenia were later unable to integrate into the country or did not receive sufficient support from the government and eventually left Armenia as well.

Sargis Aghajan, a member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, was an Assyrian politician with Armenian roots who served as Deputy Prime Minister of Iraqi Kurdistan from 2004 to 2006. He established small settlements for approximately two dozen families from various communities in the Al-Koush area, located 45 kilometres from Mosul, naming one Aghajan [Pashayan 2010]. In 2014, at the time of ISIS's occupation of the village, the Armenian population had already evacuated the area. Subsequently, the Iraqi army took control of the town; however, the Armenian community did not return. While the military utilizes the residential properties, ownership of the village remains with the Armenian side. In a recent discussion, Andranik Harutyunyan, the former Armenian Consul General in Iraqi Kurdistan, stated that approximately 3,000 Armenians reside in the region [Harutyunyan 2025].

Avzrook was established in 1932 by the Armenians of Zakho. It is in the Dohuk province, connecting Zakho and Dohuk. Before 1975, the village was divided into two parts: Armenian (Avzrook Miri) and Assyrian (Avzrook Shno). It was inhabited by Kurdish-speaking Armenians and Assyrians, who had a mutually beneficial relationship. Saddam Hussein's government displaced the population of Avzrook and Hawrezk, and Arabs were resettled in their place for security reasons. This strategy was not targeted at the Armenians themselves, but rather aimed at undermining the support that many villages in Kurdistan provided to the Peshmerga (the Kurdish paramilitary forces) [Kotchikian 2016]. Armenians gradually began returning to Avzrook from 1996 onward, with a notable increase in 2005 when the village was rebuilt with financial support from the Kurdish government. The Armenian Apostolic Church of Sourp Vartan was built in Avzrook in 2002 with financial support from the charity Caritas. It was the village's first-ever church. Between 1933 and 1975, religious services had been held in private homes, as constructing

a dedicated church had not been possible due to a lack of funding [Mesopotamiaheritage]. Avzrook houses a Sunday school and a district council. The Armenians in Avzrook share a similar way of life with the Kurds; they speak Kurdish but maintain an Armenian identity [Pashayan 2010]. Young people from here seek employment in Zakho and neighbouring towns, as agriculture is not their primary source of income.

Hawrezk was re-established in 2005 and is home to urban-dwelling, Armenian-speaking Iraqi Armenians. Only those who lived in the village of Hawrezk spoke Armenian, as they had been displaced from the city of Van in Turkey. Initially, they spoke Armenian and had a school, so they retained it and continued speaking it even after their migration [Mahdi, Kerob 2023, 23]. The village has a Sunday school and a Community Council. Notably, Hawrezk was founded in 1928 by Armenian military figure Levon Pasha Shaghoyan to provide a settlement for Armenians who were survived the events of 1915 [Ohanyan 2024, 153–154]. In the late 1970s, during Saddam Hussein's rule, the Armenian population was forced out of the village due to clashes between the state and Kurdish military units. Many settlements in the northern border region were also depopulated during this time. Sargis Aghajan later reestablished Hawrezk, and through his efforts, 115 houses were constructed in the village [Kotchikian 2016]. In Hawrezk, the Saint Sargis Armenian Church underwent renovations in 2012, facilitated by the non-governmental organization "Gapn". The village lacks privately owned land, as the majority of the population, following their displacement in 1975, sold their property to local Kurdish inhabitants. According to A. Harutyunyan, access to the village was previously hindered by poor road conditions, though repair work is currently underway. The population of Hawrezk remains almost stable. It shows no tendency to increase because the conditions there are not very attractive. In contrast, Avzrook presents a comparatively favourable outlook, largely attributed to its retained land ownership. Both international and local organizations, alongside the Consulate General of the Republic of Armenia in Erbil, periodically provide humanitarian assistance to Armenians in need within these villages [Harutyunyan 2025].

It is difficult to determine how long the villages of Hawrezk and Avzrook will continue to exist, or whether their remaining residents will choose to stay in these areas. Equally uncertain is the extent to which Armenian national identity, expressed in both Armenian and Kurdish, will be maintained over time. Hawrezk and Avzrook differ significantly from Kessab, a historic Armenian settlement where Armenians have resided since antiquity and where deeply rooted Armenian traditions remain largely intact. These villages also contrast with Anjar, whose Armenian population descends from the Armenians of Musa Dagh and possesses a strong sense of institutional memory and considerable experience in organized communal life. Unlike the Armenian populations of Anjar and Kessab, a portion of the Armenians living in Iraqi Kurdistan are Kurdish-speaking. However, their Christian faith serves as the foundation of their Armenian identity and prevents their assimilation. It is important to note, however, that while Kessab and Anjar are situated within predominantly Arab socio-cultural environments, Hawrezk and Avzrook are in Kurdish-majority regions, presenting different dynamics of minority integration, identity preservation, and community development. In this region, a significant portion of the Armenians is Kurdish-speaking. In many cases, Armenians living in other towns and cities of Iraqi Kurdistan, such as Zakho, Duhok, or Kirkuk, are also fluent in both Kurdish and Armenian. Armenians here successfully collaborate with Kurds. Without specifying a date, Lebanese Armenian author Asbed Kochikian notes that the Armenian villagers of Hawrezk, together with Kurdish Peshmerga forces, patrolled the village when ISIS was only fifty miles away [Kotchikian 2016]. The authors, Mahdi and Kerob, observed that

The Armenians in Kurdistan are like the Kurds in all aspects, and there is no distinction between them. Most Armenians speak Kurdish, and their women and children primarily communicate in Kurdish, knowing little of other languages. Their norms, customs, and traditions

closely align with those of the Kurds. Thus, Kurds and Armenians become “kriv” or “blood brothers”, living together in harmony without oppression [Mahdi, Kerob 2023, 18].

The Armenian villages in Iraqi Kurdistan currently benefit from the support of the Kurdish authorities, particularly within the broader context of the surrounding Arab Muslim environment. That support was especially important during the period of atrocities instigated by the Jihadist forces, particularly ISIS. In any case, from a formal standpoint, Anjar, Kessab, Hawrezk, and Avzrook have the support of their respective governments. However, such support is not always effective, especially in the face of attacks by transnational armed groups, which may deliberately target ethnic and religious minorities.

### ***Conclusion***

Even though Armenian communities have experienced periods of prosperity and flourishing in many Arab countries, they have nevertheless faced numerous challenges because of political instability, social unrest, and economic crises. In recent decades, the regional environment became increasingly volatile following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, which, along with the wave of uprisings triggered by the “Arab Spring” since 2011, led to a sharp deterioration in regional security and peaceful coexistence. The rise of sectarian tensions, violence, and lack of security has significantly threatened the existence of Christian minorities, including Armenians across the Middle East. The violent attack on Armenian-populated Kessab on March 21, 2014, by rebel forces raised serious concern and anxiety regarding the future of Armenian communities in Syria. Following the incidents in Kessab, many residents left and never returned, despite the town’s liberation on June 15, 2014. The absence of reliable security guarantees deepens the uncertainty after the fall of the al-Assad regime. Similar dynamics have affected the Armenian community in Anjar.

Lebanon’s prolonged political and economic crisis since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has also created uncertainty about the future of the Armenian enclave. In Iraq, the broader exodus of Christians, driven by worsening security conditions and targeted violence, has profoundly impacted the Armenian community. The prospects for Armenian presence in the Armenian villages of Iraqi Kurdistan are also uncertain, due to security concerns, economic decline and demographic changes. In Syria, Lebanon, and Iraqi Kurdistan, concerns over assimilation are minimal from an Armenian perspective.

However, the future of Armenian rural communities largely depends on the younger generation, which increasingly perceives limited prospects for remaining in fragile and unstable environments, and the lack of access to quality higher education. Therefore, the challenges facing Armenians should be viewed within the broader context of the perspective of Christians in the Middle East, which, at present, offers little cause for optimism. Nonetheless, revitalization and renewal, particularly in Kessab and Anjar, are entirely possible, especially if regional conflicts and sectarian violence come to an end and the local economies, particularly tourism, begin to develop. In any case, particularly for Kessab, the grounds for optimism are relatively limited, given the uncertain future of Syria.

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<sup>1</sup> Musa Dagh, located in the modern-day district of Samandağ (formerly known as Süveydiye) in Hatay Province, Turkey, stands as a powerful symbol of Armenian resistance during the mass persecution of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. In July 1915, the Ottoman government’s deportation orders reached the six Armenian villages of the Musa Dagh region: Kabusie, Yoghunoluk, Bitias, Vakef, Khederbeg, and Haji-Habibli. Refusing to comply, the villagers retreated to the Mountain of Moses (Musa Dagh) and organized a determined defense. After 53 days of resistance against Ottoman forces, and with supplies dwindling and hope fading, the Armenians managed to

signal Allied ships by raising large banners reading “Christians in Distress: Rescue”. Their plea was spotted by the crew of the French warship *Guichen*, patrolling the eastern Mediterranean. The subsequent rescue by French naval forces marked the only successful evacuation of an Armenian population during the tragic events of 1915, saving more than 4,000 lives. After staying in Port Said, Egypt, for two years, the people of Musa Dagh returned to their homes. This extraordinary act of survival and defiance later inspired Austrian writer Franz Werfel to write *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*. This novelized account became an international bestseller upon its publication in 1933.

<sup>2</sup> Armenian *harissa* is a traditional dish deeply rooted in Armenian cultural and communal life, especially significant in rural Armenian towns like Kessab and Anjar. It is a hearty porridge-like stew made primarily from wheat (usually korkot, or dried/cracked wheat) and meat, traditionally lamb or chicken.

<sup>3</sup> The article was completed when we learned that the school belonging to the Catholic community in Kessab, which also served children from Alawite families in the town, has been closed [Yazichian 2025].

<sup>4</sup> “Kantasar”, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/share/1JkQW3zZGW/> (accessed October 4, 2025).

<sup>5</sup> Arevelk (2025), “Let’s Talk Frankly #49, Hakob Cholakian on Kessab, Western Armenian, and the Real Homeland”, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NtuTcWl8my0> (accessed September 30, 2025).

#### **Interviews with diplomats, scholars and community members from the communities conducted by the authors**

Aintabian Khajag (2025), Armenian dentist, resident of Anjar. Interview with Pashayan Araks, March. [Personal archive].

Apelian-Ayanian Shoghag (2024), Armenian teacher and community member in the UAE. Interview with Pashayan Araks, June. [Personal archive, online].

Ashegian Maria (2025), MA student at Yerevan State University. Interview with Pashayan Araks, May. [Personal archive].

Ashegian Shogher (2024), Specialist of Armenian Diaspora, resident of Kessab. Interview with Pashayan Araks, January. [Personal archive, online].

Bagdoyan Natalie (2025), Armenian community member in the UAE. Interview with Pashayan Araks, June. [Personal archive, online].

Dakessian Alina (2025), Armenian teacher in Beirut. Interview with Pashayan Araks, December. [Personal archive].

Dakessian Antranik (2025), Director of the Armenian Diaspora Research Center, Haigazian University, Lebanon. Interview with Pashayan Araks, December. [Personal archive].

Harutyunyan Andranik (2025), Interview with Manukyan Tatevik, Armenian diplomat, Consul of the General Consulate of RA in KRG (2022–2024), September. [Personal archive, online].

Nalbandian Hovsep (2025), specialist of Armenian Diaspora. Interview with Pashayan Araks, October. [Personal archive].

Jebejian Hrayr (2025), General Secretary of the Bible Society in the Gulf region, a specialist in Armenian communities of Arab countries. Interview with Pashayan Araks, December. [Personal archive].

Katerjian Avo (2025), specialist of Syrian Armenian community, Aleppo. Interview with Pashayan Araks, May. [Personal archive].

Khoshian Hovhannes (2024), Previous teacher in Anjar. Interview with Pashayan Araks, November. [Personal archive].

Poladyan Arshak (2025), Ambassador of Armenia to Syria (2007–2018). Interview with Pashayan Araks, March. [Personal archive].

Saghdejian Salpy (2024), Syrian Armenian intellectual. Interview with Pashayan Araks, November. [Personal archive].

Sanjian Ara (2025), Director of the Armenian Research Center at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. Interview with Pashayan Araks, December. [Personal archive].

Yazichian Kevork (2025), specialist in History and Armenian Diaspora. Interview with Pashayan Araks, October. [Personal archive].

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### **Стійкість і вразливість меншин: вірменські християнські села в арабському і курдському контекстах**

Головною метою цієї статті є дослідження сучасних реалій культурного виживання та ключових викликів, зокрема тих, що пов'язані з безпекою, з якими стикаються вірменські християнські громади в сільській місцевості арабських країн. У статті досліджується, як складна взаємодія історичної спадщини та сучасних геополітичних і соціально-політичних подій сформувала ці виклики. Розміщуючи вірменський випадок у ширшому контексті занепаду християнства на Близькому Сході, дослідження стверджує, що труднощі, з якими стикаються вірменські громади, тісно пов'язані із занепадом християнства в усьому регіоні.

Особливу увагу приділено тому, як ці виклики виявляються та відрізняються в соціокультурних умовах Близького Сходу, і запропоновано порівняльну основу для розуміння їхньої специфічної динаміки.

Зосереджуючись на сільських громадах, стаття має на меті висвітлити як унікальні характеристики сільського вірменського життя, так і спільний досвід сільського та міського вірменського населення в Сирії, Лівані та Іраку. Цей фокус дає змогу провести нюансований аналіз вразливостей, стійкості та адаптивних стратегій меншинних громад у різноманітних соціально-політичних та культурних ландшафтах, включно з арабським мусульманським і курдським контекстами. Дослідження зосереджене на чотирьох вірменських сільських поселеннях, які існують і сьогодні: Кессаб у Сирії, Анджар у Лівані та Хаврезк і Авзрук в Іракському Курдистані. Дослідження засвідчує, що соціальні та політичні трансформації, збройні конфлікти та епізоди насильства в регіоні негативно вплинули на демографічний склад вірменських сільських поселень, послаблюючи ці громади та створюючи відчуття невизначеності та відчаю щодо їхнього майбутнього. Проте, незважаючи на ці виклики, вірменська ідентичність у цих сільських районах залишається стійкою, а місцеві вірменські громади і далі підтримують динамічне та яскраве національно-культурне життя.

**Ключові слова:** Авзрук; Анджар; безпека; Близький Схід; вірменські громади; ідентичність; Кессаб; сільські райони; Хаврезк; християни

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