

# PROTECTING EASTERN CHRISTIANITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: RUSSIA'S NEW DIPLOMATIC TOOL?

*The intensification of Russia's diplomacy in the Middle East is combined with a clearly defined objective: positioning itself as the new protector of persecuted Christians in the region. The author highlights both the ambitions of the Kremlin in the Mediterranean and the ever-growing influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, which has become a major political actor. Moscow sees Shiite Islam as its ally in the Middle East and is increasingly aligning itself with a Shiite axis composed of Iran, Syria, and the Lebanese Hezbollah. The author examines this burgeoning Russian-Shiite alliance in light of Russia's strategic interests in the region.*

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**I**n the post-Soviet era, the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church are working together to promote a religious revival affecting Russian socio-political dynamics as well as external relationships. This has led to the revitalization of imperial Russia's heritage as the protector of Orthodox Christians in the Middle East.

For the past several years, Moscow has been paying increased attention to these communities by claiming a protective role. At the highest level of the state, then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin himself reiterated his full support to this if elected president in front of a group of religious leaders.<sup>1</sup> Since his election in May 2012, support of Christian communities has become a pillar of Russia's foreign policy.

### *Promoting Russian Soft Power in the Middle East*

To serve this purpose, Russia has relied on historical and influential institutions whose roles have grown considerably in recent years.

The revival of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society in the Holy Land (IPPO), founded in 1882, has been at the core of this initiative. Its initial goals were to facilitate the pilgrimage of Christian Orthodox worshippers to the Holy Land, to reinforce the spiritual influence of the Orthodox Church, and to build ties with the peoples of the Middle East.

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, the IPPO has been given a new impetus, especially under the leadership of its chairman, former Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin who took over in 2007; disseminating Russian language and culture, and promoting Orthodox faith are at the heart of his concerns. In this regard, the IPPO has worked closely with the Israeli authorities to recover land and buildings previously owned by the Society. Additionally, cultural projects have been launched in cities of high symbolic and religious value. On 18 January 2011, a Russian museum and a park were inaugurated by Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in Jericho. On 26 June 2012, Putin and Abbas opened a Russian Center for Science and Culture built on two plots provided by the Palestinian Authority. On this occasion, the Russian president said: "Bethlehem, a well-known and respected city worldwide, where Jesus Christ was born, is welcoming today a Russian center for science and culture. It embodies the succession of the spiritual and human ties that link Russia and the Holy Land for centuries; it demonstrates the privileged relationships between our

<sup>1</sup> "Russia Will Protect Christian Minorities in the Middle East," *The Russian Orthodox Church: Department for External Church Relations*, 9 February 2012, <https://mospat.ru/en/2012/02/09/news57990/>

two peoples.”<sup>2</sup> On 3 September 2014, the IPPO opened a branch in the Orthodox Center of Nazareth.

Outside Israel and the Palestinian territories, President Putin participated in the official opening of a pilgrim house on a plot donated by King of Jordan Abdullah II in 2006, near the archaeological and religious site of Al-Maghtas (or Bethany) where John the Baptist would have baptized Jesus of Nazareth. Moreover, the chairman of the IPPO announced the opening of a Russian school in Damascus during a roundtable in Moscow on 11 November 2014.<sup>3</sup> The Kremlin has also harnessed its network of scientific and cultural centers, strengthened in 2008 by the creation of *Rosstrudnichestvo* (The Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation), whose goal is to promote Russian soft power abroad.<sup>4</sup>

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### ***The Orthodox Church: A Major Diplomatic Actor***

Since the end of the Soviet era, the Orthodox Church has been establishing itself as a major diplomatic actor. Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, elected in February 2009, embodies this new dynamic. He has used the defense of Eastern Christianity as a tool to build an influential policy in the Middle East and to consolidate Russian influence on a global scale. He travelled to the Middle East many times, notably in visits to Egypt in April 2010 and to Syria and Lebanon in November 2011. In Damascus, he met with President Bashar al-Assad and thanked him for “protecting” Christian communities.

To support those initiatives abroad, Moscow is building an active policy of hosting Christian religious dignitaries, including prominent figures such as the Lebanese Patriarch of the Maronite Catholic Church, Bechara al-Rai, in February 2013, and Metropolitan George of Homs, envoy of John X, Patriarch of Antioch and All the East in March 2013. In July 2013, the celebrations marking the 1025th anniversary of the baptism of Russia were the highlight of this policy. By receiving delegations of Orthodox religious leaders from all over the world, the Russian Orthodox Church

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Statements for the press following Russian-Palestinian talks,” speech given on 26 June 2012, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/15748>

<sup>3</sup> “A Russian School to be established in Damascus soon,” *Syrian Arab News Agency*, 12 November 2014.

<sup>4</sup> “Russia aims to regain Middle East influence,” *The Telegraph*, 4 June 2010.

managed to reaffirm its leadership over Orthodox Christians while denouncing violence against Christian minorities on that occasion.<sup>5</sup>

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In this respect, the Department for External Church Relations (DECR) of the Russian Orthodox Church is playing an instrumental role in spreading this message worldwide. Its chairman, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, personifies this new religious diplomacy by delivering numerous speeches at international organizations, universities, and research centers all over the world.<sup>6</sup> Following the May 2011 deadly riots in Imbaba, a neighborhood west of Cairo, during which Coptic churches were

burned to the ground, Metropolitan Hilarion insisted there was an ever-growing escalation of “Christianophobia” in Middle Eastern countries.<sup>7</sup> In November 2013, he even described the atrocities against Christian communities as “genocide,” saying that the Middle East was a dangerous “hotbed of persecutions.”<sup>8</sup> Patriarch Kirill has emphasized the risks following the eviction of Christians from their land, describing the situation as a “civilization catastrophe;” his message not only addressed Orthodox Christians, but also Catholics.

The Orthodox Church has launched a series of both symbolic and operational initiatives in the region to show its support to Christian communities. During his visit to the University of Balamand, a private Lebanese university linked to the Orthodox Church of Antioch, Patriarch Kirill donated 50,000 dollars to the university’s Theological Institute. In August 2013 he handed over 1.3 million dollars to the Patriarch of Antioch. Moreover, humanitarian aid has been conveyed to Christian Syrians by the IPPO. Apart from practical material and financial aid, symbolic initiatives are undertaken to illustrate Russian presence in the region: a giant statue of Jesus Christ was erected and inaugurated in October 2013 at the top of the

5 Patriarch Kirill, “By celebrating the 1025th anniversary of the Baptism of Rus’ we close the link of times,” 30 July 2013, <http://www.pravmir.com/patriarch-kirill-by-celebrating-the-1025th-anniversary-of-the-baptism-of-rus-we-close-the-link-of-times/>

6 See: the DECR’s website, <https://mospat.ru/en>

7 Metropolitan Hilarion, “Escalation of ‘Christianophobia’ in Middle Eastern countries,” statement on 9 May 2011.

8 Metropolitan Hilarion, “The humanitarian tragedy of Syrian Christians: a challenge to the whole civilized world,” speech given on 17 November 2013, <http://orientalreview.org/2013/11/21/the-humanitarian-tragedy-of-syrian-christians-a-challenge-to-the-whole-civilized-world/>

Cherubim Mountain in the Syrian town of Sednaya.<sup>9</sup> This project was carried out by the Theological Academy of Moscow and financed by the Russian Foundation St. Paul and St. George; the Monastery of Sednaya, built in 530, is a major pilgrimage site in the Middle East.

### *A Renewal of Russian Leadership*

Russia is seemingly not willing to limit its mandate solely to the protection of Orthodox Christians. Moscow has wider ambitions that encompass the entirety of Christian communities of the Middle East. For this purpose, Russia's policy rests on several pillars.

First, Moscow consistently denounces the poor involvement of European countries in protecting Christian communities. It considers that the issue of "Christianophobia" in countries where Christians are a minority is not sufficiently addressed compared to the attention that is paid to other minorities on the continent.<sup>10</sup> By the same logic, both the Kremlin<sup>11</sup> and the Orthodox Church criticize the reluctance of some European countries to officially assert their Christian roots due to growing secular tendencies in European societies.<sup>12</sup>

Russia also indicates that tensions in the Middle East reflect the struggles between world powers fighting for political and economic influence rather than local confrontations between governments and civilians. Therefore, Christians are targeted and become the hostages of Western foreign policy that is "arming terrorists."<sup>13</sup>

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9 Dina Hadid, "Syria: Giant Jesus Statue Put Up Between Warring Factions On Cherubim Mountain," *Huffington Post Religion*, 5 November 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/05/syria-giant-jesus\\_n\\_4218736.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/05/syria-giant-jesus_n_4218736.html)

10 Hilarion (2011).

11 Sergey Lavrov, "Remarks by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the XXII Assembly of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy" speech given on 22 November 2014, Moscow, [http://www.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/0/24454A08D48F695EC-3257D9A004BA32E](http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/24454A08D48F695EC-3257D9A004BA32E)

12 Metropolitan Hilarion, "It is urgent that a system of protecting Christians against persecution be organized" speech given 18 May 2011 at the opening of the International Ecumenical Peace Convocatio, <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=documents&div=198>

13 Metropolitan Hilarion, "The humanitarian tragedy of Syrian Christians: a challenge to the whole civilized world," speech given on 17 November 2013, <http://orientalreview.org/2013/11/21/the-humanitarian-tragedy-of-syrian-christians-a-challenge-to-the-whole-civilized-world/>

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by Russia in case they are threatened with physical extermination by terrorists who are supported by the West.” Russia thus fills the void left by powers abandoning their traditional role of protecting Christians – France in particular – and capitalizes on anti-American feelings in the region.

Exerting its influence over Christians worldwide is the third pillar of Moscow’s policy. The Council of Bishops of the Orthodox Church that took place from 2 to 5 February 2013 openly reasserted this stance: “The protection of the Christian presence in the region as well as the defense of Christian rights and liberties remain a major axis of the Moscow Patriarch’s foreign policy.” Russia therefore promotes its experience and know-how in interfaith management within the Russian Federation to assume this mediating role, and calls upon the international community to set up a framework for the protection of Christians.

### ***Russian Interests in the Region***

The revival of this religious diplomacy is clearly an asset for Russia in reinforcing its influence in the Middle East, since Moscow has major economic interests in the region.

Energy challenges are crucial for Russia.<sup>15</sup> Russian oil and gas companies, such as Gazprom, Rosneft, or Soyuzneftegaz – some of which are financially supporting projects in the Holy Land – are involved in different initiatives, mainly the construction of pipelines to transport gas through Syria and the exploration of gas fields off the coasts of Syria, Lebanon, Cyprus, Israel, and the Palestinian Territories. It helps

<sup>14</sup> Press release by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 16 October 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Nocetti Julien, “Quelle politique énergétique pour la Russie au Moyen-Orient?” [Russia’s Energy Policy and the Middle East], *Politique étrangère*, No. 1 (Spring 2013), pp. 93-105.

Moscow keep a careful eye on possible competing routes for gas pipelines.<sup>16</sup> In order to bypass Western sanctions, Moscow has an interest in reaffirming its presence in the region to redirect part of its gas exports, at Europe's expense. In addition, Rosatom, the Russian state-owned nuclear-energy company, is developing two new reactors at the Bushehr plant in Iran, where one reactor already built by Russia is operational.

Following a period of strained relations with Iran, due to Russia's support for increased sanctions against Iran at the UN Security Council in July 2010, Moscow is now getting closer to Tehran. Russia currently favors a Shiite axis by allying with Iran, the Alawite governing minority in Syria, and the Lebanese Hezbollah.

Moscow is encouraging dialogue with Shiite Islam, as Iranian clerics are Russia's privileged interlocutors. The clear hierarchical structure of Shiism reassures Russia in a period in which the threat of Islamic extremism and terrorism, notably from Chechen jihadists, remains a priority for Moscow. Since the majority of Muslims in Russia and the Federation are Sunni Muslims, there is a need to build an alliance with Shiite Muslims to balance Sunni influence, led by Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom, seen as a promoter of Sunni extremism in the region, is refusing to cut oil production that pushes down oil prices and harms Russia. Moscow's recent decision to resume arms supplies by selling anti-aircraft S-300 missiles to Tehran is in line with this policy; the missiles were ordered in 2007, but Russia halted the sale due to international pressure.<sup>17</sup>

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In addition, in line with Russia, Shiite leaders emphasized their protective role for Christians. Iran has proved it tolerates its Christian enclaves, while there are no churches in Saudi Arabia, for example. Hezbollah, backed by Iran, formed a political alliance with the Lebanese “Free Patriotic Movement,” a political party ruled by former General and Christian Maronite Michel Aoun. Both Hezbollah and Bashar al-Assad's regime claim Christians can openly live in Shiite and Alawite strongholds, where they are protected and where their presence is supported. Moreover, Christians and Shiites, especially those in Iraq and Syria, are targeted by Sunni

<sup>16</sup> Ruba Husari, “Syria and the Changing Middle East Energy Map,” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 2 January 2013, Beirut.

<sup>17</sup> “Putin's targeted strike: The meaning of Russia's weapons sale to Iran,” *The Economist*, 18 April 2015.



extremists since both religious communities are seen as “infidels.” This Shiite-Christian alliance is therefore supported by Russia as it reassures Christians in the Middle East, who are surrounded by Muslims and are increasingly afraid of Sunni extremism. Within this context, it is not uncommon to see images of Jesus Christ and Imam Ali or Imam Hussein side by side, and even an emergence of Christian-Shiite militias in Syria and Iraq to fight the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).<sup>18</sup>

Finally, this alliance with Iran can also be seen as a means to secure Russia’s energy exports in case the sanctions against Iran are lifted. Due to its privileged geographic position, Iran would easily become a competitor to Russia in terms of gas exports towards Asia and Europe. Hence, Russia sees the need for a privileged and negotiated alliance with Tehran. However, the strength and the longevity of this alliance now depend on the reshuffling of cards in the region.

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18 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Sample Concepts of a Christian-Shi’a Alliance in Iraq,” *Syria Comment*, 31 December 2014, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/sample-concepts-christian-shia-alliance-iraq/>