

# The Christian Dimension of Russia's Middle East Policy

Leonid Issaev & Serafim Yuriev

**Abstract:** Orthodox Christianity arguably constitutes the foundation of the entire Russian cultural spectrum. The majority of Russians feel close to the eastern Christian tradition and identify with it to varying degrees. Thus, Orthodoxy inevitably has a profound influence on society. On the other hand, the Russian Orthodox Church does not officially position itself as an active political power; on the contrary, its position is that churches are spiritual institutions alien to big politics. Nevertheless, it still has a significant impact upon the political elite.

In this context, the "Orthodox question" has been steadily growing in post-Soviet Russia, becoming a convenient tool for the Russian government to use to encourage ideological values clearly reflecting their domestic and foreign policy among the Russian population. Syria has now become the most suitable platform from which to make use of the "Orthodox factor". This analysis will not comment on whether or not the real purpose of the Russian military operation has been the protection of the Christian population in Syria. This is not the point. There is no doubt, however, that the protection of the Orthodox population in Syria is actively being used by the Kremlin to justify Russia's military operation in the eyes of its own population. Hence, Orthodoxy in its role as a fundamental element of modern Russian identity is being used as a way of legitimizing the actions of the Russian leadership in Syria.

## The historic role of Christianity in Russian external affairs

The idea of moral and financial support for Christians around the globe is very familiar to the Russian Church and to Russia itself. Indeed, the aspirations of the Russian government and the Church coincide in a desire to maintain the unity and prosperity of the world Orthodox community. From the Russian Church's perspective, any kind of aid to suffering Christians wherever they are in the world is undoubtedly a positive thing, fully reflecting the historic mission of Russia as a katechon state – the strongest Orthodox power and the successor to the Byzantine Empire in the role of protector of Orthodox Christians throughout the world.

Orthodox Christians outside of Russia predominantly live in the Balkans and the Middle East. In the Middle East they are largely found in the Levant and the southeast of Turkey. From the 15th century onwards, as a result of the conquest of Constantinople and the subsequent Turkish expansion, all these areas came under Turkish rule. That is why we can reasonably draw a link between Russia and Eastern Orthodox churches in the context of the Russian-Ottoman struggle.<sup>1</sup> From the 17th century to the end of the Russian Empire there were regular Russian-Turkish wars for influence in the areas of the Ottoman Empire where the native Christian population lived (primarily the Balkans and Georgia and Ossetia in the Caucasus).

The intention to protect the Orthodox Church in the Ottoman Empire stemmed from Russia being the most significant Orthodox political power of the time., In one of the articles of the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca in 1774, the right to partially supervise the rights of Orthodox Christians was formally given to Russia. Afterwards, two armed conflicts that perfectly demonstrated the

traditional tendency of Russia to support their brothers in faith took place during the reign for Nicholas I (1825–1885). The first followed the outbreak of the Greek War of Independence (1821–1830) and constituted a defense of the Greek Orthodox nation by Russia in its struggle against what was perceived as repressive Turkish rule. The second conflict, historically known as the Crimean War (1853–1856), ended in the Treaty of Paris (1856), which presented Russia with highly unfavorable terms. Significantly, the impetus for Russia to declare war on the Ottoman Empire had been an insult by the Ottoman sultan to orthodox christians – he passed the keys to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem to the Catholics, in utter disregard of the rights of the Orthodox Church in the Holy Land. This typical historical precedent is very important, vividly demonstrating that Russia started this unnecessary war purely for the sake of those sharing their faith. Evidently, Russian traditional foreign policy included the permanent protection of orthodox christians in the regions over which she could exert her influence.

***From the Russian Church's perspective, any kind of aid to suffering Christians wherever they are in the world is undoubtedly a positive thing, fully reflecting the historic mission of Russia as a katechon state – the strongest Orthodox power and the successor to the Byzantine Empire in the role of protector of Orthodox Christians throughout the world.***

It should be emphasized that Russian participation in the life of Levantine orthodoxy was significantly less active than in the Balkans or the Caucasus. Nonetheless, the links between orthodox Arabs and the Russian Empire were still quite close. Consequently, financial aid in the form of royal alms was regularly sent to Eastern Orthodox Churches during the reign of Ivan the Terrible (1534-1584) and among the recipients was

the Antioch (Arabic) Orthodox Church. For example, historians recorded unprecedented donations of large sums of cash from Ivan IV to all the eastern patriarchs in September 1558 via Archimandrite Gennady and the merchant Vasily Poznyakov<sup>2</sup>. It is presumed that close contact between Russia and the Antiochian Orthodox Church was established after the visit of Patriarch of Antioch Joachim Dow in 1586 to Moscow where one of his companions, Metropolitan Isa, reported being delighted by the beauty of Moscow and the glamor of the czar's court.

***Russian traditional foreign policy included the permanent protection of orthodox christians in the regions over which she could exert her influence.***

As the Russian arabist Konstantin Panchenko notes, "That is how the legends of the fabulous wealth of the Muscovites arose urging masses of eastern clerics to travel to Russia in hope of the czar's handouts."<sup>3</sup> To tell the truth, such visits were quite rare and the relationship between Antioch and Russia was not regularly renewed. However, it was during this period that the brotherly feelings and compassion of the Orthodox Arabs for Russia began to have political consequences. It even be said that they made the strategic choice of a geopolitical patron.

The key event in the history of Russian-Arab orthodox relations was the visit of Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch Macarius to Moscow in the mid-17th century. Macarius spent about two years in Russia, and strengthened ties with Moscow significantly, leaving a long memory of this event in both Syria and in Russia. As a result, the grounds for political and religious interactions were laid. Moreover, there emerged a situation in which the Orthodox Arabs, chafing under the Turkish yoke, looked to Russia for political



and financial support, while Russia in turn used them as informers about the political situation in the Middle East. Many pages in the history of Moscow's relations with the Orthodox East are known to have been written by members of Christian Orthodox society in the Ottoman territories, including military and political intelligence about the lay of the land in the Middle East.

***The key event in the history of Russian-Arab orthodox relations was the visit of Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch Macarius to Moscow in the mid-17th century.***

When Peter the Great became Russian Emperor this policy altered dramatically. Due to Russia's turn to the west in this period, the country's connection with the Eastern patriarchates noticeably weakened. A permanent Russian diplomatic mission was established in Istanbul and the need for informers disappeared. However, the orientation of the churches in Antioch and Jerusalem toward Russia remained unchanged. For example, the correspondence of Jerusalem Patriarch Parthenius (1737–1766) with the Russian resident in Istanbul Alexey Vishnyakov (1700–1745) displays the patriarch's pro-Russian mindset. Subsequently, in 1882, the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, which is still active to this day, was founded by emperor Alexander III. At the time it was a rather influential humanitarian organization funded directly from the treasury of the Russian Empire. Its main task was to promote the Orthodox pilgrimage to the Holy Land, scholarly research in Palestine, orientalism, and humanitarian cooperation with the peoples of the Middle East. This body can be described as a symbol of the high point of Russia's cultural presence in the Middle East.

Paradoxically, by inertia, the traditional relationship between Russia and Eastern Orthodoxy in the Middle East persisted

even throughout the Soviet atheistic era. It is common knowledge that in Soviet times, the Orthodox community in the Middle East were the conductors of Soviet influence in the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> The most commonly given example of this phenomenon is the public defense of the Soviet Union's policy and presence in the Middle East by the Metropolitan of the Biblos and Botriss, Elias Karam.

It appears that relations between Russia and Orthodox Arabs have already started to manifest themselves with renewed vigor. Russia is historically bound to a close working partnership with the Arab Orthodox Church. Given this rich history of bilateral relations, which originated in the distant era of Ivan the Terrible and continued throughout the centuries, even surviving the Soviet era, renewed collaboration was almost inevitable.

***Paradoxically, by inertia, the traditional relationship between Russia and Eastern Orthodoxy in the Middle East persisted even throughout the Soviet atheistic era. It is common knowledge that in Soviet times, the Orthodox community in the Middle East were the conductors of Soviet influence in the Middle East.***

**The role of Middle Eastern Orthodox Christians in the external affairs of modern Russia**

Christians living on the territory of the Levant are represented by two patriarchates: Jerusalem and Antioch. The jurisdiction of the patriarchate of Antioch extends into Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and the eastern regions of Turkey. It has positioned itself as the Orthodox Church of the Arabs. Consequently, the official language used in documents and negotiations, and the language of worship in the church of Antioch is Arabic. The vast majority of the leadership of the Church of Antioch are ethnic Arabs, in contrast with



that of Jerusalem. They number about 1 million people, of whom more than 500,000 are inhabitants of Syria, and they represent the largest group of Christians in that country. Approximately 300,000 adherents of this church live in Lebanon, and a small number are scattered across different parts of Turkey and Iraq. The Antioch community also has a large and prosperous diaspora abroad (in North and South America, Europe and Australia), which has helped it to become one of the most active in terms of missionary activities. The jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem covers Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. The patriarchy positions itself as Greek, so almost all the episcopate is constituted of ethnic Greeks while ordinary clergy and the majority of parishioners are Arabs. This situation has caused a sort of central-provincial discord, manifested in constant tensions between the leadership and the lower ranks of the church. Services in the Palestinian Orthodox Church are generally conducted in Arabic. At present, the Jerusalem Church has about 200,000 members.

***At this point the political orientation of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian government coincide, as at present the interests of the Russian state are closely linked to the position of Orthodox Christians in Syria.***

Since ancient times the Church of Antioch and the Church of Jerusalem have been rivals for influence in the region. During the 16th and 17th centuries, they were in constant competition for alms from the Russian sovereign. Over time, this situation has not fundamentally changed: today, tensions have only worsened, since the Patriarchate of Antioch is in dispute with the Orthodox Church in Jerusalem over the legitimacy of the Jerusalem diocese in Qatar, which the Patriarchate of Antioch considers its canonical

territory. In this dispute, the Patriarchate of Antioch seeks an ally in the Patriarch of Moscow, while Jerusalem is more focused on Constantinople. At this point the political orientation of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian government coincide, as at present the interests of the Russian state are closely linked to the position of Orthodox Christians in Syria.

***One of the weak points of Russian policy in Syria is the country's participation in the civil war on the side of one of the parties to the conflict. This appears to significantly weaken the position of the Russian leadership, making it overly dependent on the present regime in Damascus, whose future may well be tenuous.***

The current interests of the Russian government in Syria can be briefly summed up in the following key points:

**1. The search for additional footholds to strengthen its positions in the Middle East**

One of the weak points of Russian policy in Syria is the country's participation in the civil war on the side of one of the parties to the conflict. This appears to significantly weaken the position of the Russian leadership, making it overly dependent on the present regime in Damascus, whose future may well be tenuous. This in turn has encouraged Russia to search for alternative allies in the region.

The alliance with Bashar al-Assad, mainly built on coinciding political interests, is rather fragile and ephemeral. To a certain extent, it depends on the political situation and the balance of power across the world. On the other hand, a potential alliance with Syria's Orthodox Christians, based on the same moral values and long historical traditions, would be much more long





term and solid, as it would require much less bartering and fewer considerations of interests. Metaphorically speaking, it rests on timeless pillars and thus depends less on the contingencies of the changeable political situation.

***Moreover, even the most pragmatic goals of Russia and the Christians in the Levant are essentially the same, because both sides are interested in keeping power in the hands of the ruling secular regime, which is able to guarantee that it will take Christian minority rights and interests into account.***

These judgments are backed up by the statement made by Russian President Vladimir Putin in April 2015, on the eve of the Russian air force operation in Syria, in which he clearly expressed Russia's deep concern about the worrying situation for Christians in the country: "Concerning the situation of the Christians in the Middle East—they are terrible. We have already raised this problem several times, and we believe that the international community is not taking adequate measures to protect the Christian population in the Middle East".<sup>5</sup> Arguably, these words contained clues to one of the most important vectors in Russian foreign policy in the Middle East.

The same idea was fairly quickly repeated by the Russian Orthodox Church. The head of the Department for External Church Relations, Metropolitan Ilarion, noted that one of the key directions of foreign policy should be a fight against "the systematic protection of Christians wherever they are persecuted."<sup>6</sup> Moreover, even the most pragmatic goals of Russia and the Christians in the Levant are essentially the same, because both sides are interested in keeping power in the hands of the ruling secular regime, which is able to guarantee that it will take Christian minority rights and interests into account.

Besides, the Church of Antioch, which is the sole representative of orthodox Christians in Syria, is a highly attractive partner for Russia. In particular, this is due to its relative independence from the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian government, as well as being reasonably efficient in protecting Christians, for example through its active participation in humanitarian operations in the Middle East. In view of this, the vast majority of the followers of the Church of Antioch have shown remarkable loyalty and remained in their settlements despite the threatening situation. In many ways, this is possible because of the financial and moral support of the Church. The Patriarch of Antioch, Ioann X, in turn, continually urges his congregation to remain in their ancestral lands, thereby curbing Christian migration from the country, which is also extremely useful for Russia. This is firstly because it helps enlist support for its moral mission in the region, and secondly, because it expects that in the future this category of people will constitute a reliable foothold for Russia in the region.

## **2. Creating a favorable image of Russia among the world's Christian denominations as opposing "Christian genocide"<sup>7</sup> in the Middle East**

The massacre of Christians, which has been mainly carried out by ISIS in Syria and Iraq, has created an imperative for intervention across the whole Christian world. Despite fundamental contradictions that have historically led to the separation of Christian denominations, today they are beginning to unite their efforts. In this context, the recent statement of Patriarch of Moscow and Pan-Russia Kirill is very significant: "Today the war against terrorism must be common to the world community; it is not only Russia's concern but the concern of all nations. We must unite in order to defeat evil, and I call this war a holy war."<sup>8</sup>



Patriarch Kirill's call to the international community to put an end to the bloodshed in the region as soon as possible has been echoed by similar appeals by Russian officials, who have appealed for others to join their efforts in the fight against this "universal evil", which Russia has been fighting in Syria for more than a year.

***The Russian Orthodox Church as a symbol of the distinctive cultural values of the Russian nation and therefore the basis of its identity plays a vast role in shaping these foreign interests.***

As can be seen, the call of the Russian patriarch has found an audience. During a meeting in Cuba in February 2016, Patriarch Kirill and Pope Francis jointly called on the international community "to take immediate action to prevent further displacement of Christians from the Middle East."<sup>9</sup> This joint statement represents a historically unprecedented expression of solidarity between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. It is immensely significant that the unanimity between the two hierarchs was motivated by the issue of Christians in the Middle East, because it proves how the issue of the oppression of Christians in the Middle Eastern unites the Christian community.

In addition to Catholics, there is a consensus on this issue among U.S. protestants. Thus, the president of The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA), William Franklin Graham, also supported the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian government in their campaign in Syria:

*"I believe that his [Patriarch Kirill's] support for the Syrian government can protect the lives of Christians in Syria. I said the same thing at the meeting with Vladimir Putin. He has very clearly and directly formulated the goal of Russia in Syria: to prevent the state*

*institutions in Syria from a total collapse, as long as the Syrian government stands up for the rights of the Christians. If the existing state institutions are destroyed, there will be an outbreak of genocide in the country. While the majority of Christians who are now under the protection of the Syrian regime will be simply exterminated. I presume that the involvement of Russia in this situation will finally bring us to the political solution of this crisis. Almost certainly Syrian Christians comprehend the participation in the conflict as the safest way to save themselves."*<sup>10</sup>

All these events are crucially important, because they vividly illustrate how powerful the impetus to protect those of their faith in the Middle East can be in consolidating Christians the whole world over.

**3. Justifying the Russian campaign in Syria to its population**

However, the main benefit of this alliance for the Russian political elite is that they can justify military interference in Syria as efforts to protect suffering Christians. At present, a relatively large part of the Russian intelligentsia openly opposes this intervention. The government now has the chance to use the Christian issue in the Middle East as a strong argument against Russian liberals. Moreover, the prevention of "Christian genocide" in Syria as the main aim of Russian foreign policy is much more convincing and understandable to the indignant West than straightforward support for the authoritarian government of Bashar al-Assad.

***The Russian Orthodox Church and Russian government thus feel obliged to extend the strategy of 'civilizational security' to any who might look to them as their protector.***



The current rhetoric of Vladimir Putin and his government is mainly based on the idea of a strong and indestructible Russia with her own view of the global issues affecting the modern world, independent of that of the West, and her own approach to how they should be solved. The Russian president has already demonstrated several times that Russia is not going to sacrifice her vital interests in the Middle East or anywhere else in the world, and that the Christian issue is one of these. The Russian Orthodox Church as a symbol of the distinctive cultural values of the Russian nation and therefore the basis of its identity plays a vast role in shaping these foreign interests. Specifically, the church means that the majority of Russians associate themselves with the Orthodox civilization, which includes Orthodox Arabs. Thus, in the minds of Russian people there emerges the idea of Orthodox civilization and its existential importance for the safety and unity of Russia. Finally, the war for the safety of their brothers in faith becomes a war for the sake of their culture and civilization.

By means of the Orthodox community, Russia has an opportunity to broaden her cultural space and to create a long-lasting cultural influence in Syria. Not so long ago, Bashar al-Assad announced that the Russian language would be studied in Syrian schools as a compulsory subject.<sup>11</sup> The Russian government believes that language, together with religion, are the fundamental components of a nation and its culture. For example, the great potential of cultural influence is clearly expressed through the fairly effective activity of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society (IOPS), which has been able to penetrate all the humanitarian spheres of life in the region and to establish strong contacts with a number of influential political figures and organizations through the support of the Orthodox community in the Levant and the Middle East.<sup>12</sup>

The Russian Orthodox Church and Russian government thus feel obliged to extend the strategy of 'civilizational security' to any who might look to them as their protector. For those who in recent years have come to be called the "Russian world", it does not make any difference whether these followers are in the east of Ukraine or in Syria: they all considered part and parcel of Russian culture. The response of Orthodox Christian Arabs is perfectly phrased in a pithy statement by a professor of philosophy at the Lebanese University, Suhail Farah: "I am confident that Russia is the only country in the world which really cares for the fate of the Middle Eastern Christianity. Despite this question being fought over in the Vatican and some other Christian countries, only in Russia has the state advocated the religious support and defense of Middle Eastern Christians."<sup>13</sup>

#### **4. The remnants of Russia's presence in the Middle East Orthodox arena**

It would be convenient to draw attention to another important fact that helps us to clarify the active policy of Russia with regard to Middle Eastern Christians in recent years. To some extent it is formulated in this concise phrase by Vladimir Putin, which later became his political credo: "We do not give up our people." This thesis, which permeates all of Putin's domestic and foreign policy, is directly related to Russia's policy toward the Syrian crisis in general and Middle Eastern Christians in particular.

It is known that Russian-Syrian cooperation before the start of the "Arab Spring" in political, military and economic terms was left at a very low level. Syria had sought partners mainly in the west, maintaining close relations with Turkey and the Gulf states. As for Moscow, Damascus was not of paramount importance. The Kremlin's position on Syria has changed markedly against the background of the Libyan scenario, with Moscow considering itself



once again deceived. Within Russian society, the idea of modern Russia being unable to protect its “historic” allies in the face of Western threats, whether these be Slobodan Milosevic in Yugoslavia, Saddam Hussein in Iraq or Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, gained popularity. At the same time, significant changes in the Kremlin were taking place, with Putin taking over the presidency from Dmitry Medvedev. Since then, the Libyan precedent has been actively compared to the Syrian crisis. Thus, the protection of Bashar al-Assad’s regime became not only a matter of principle, but also a personal question of the reputation of the Russian leader.

A similar policy was carried out with regard to the Christians of the Middle East. At the beginning of this article we described in more detail the particular interest of Russian rulers in two historical zones of Orthodox settlement outside Russia: the Balkans and the Middle East. Today the Balkan peninsula can be viewed as almost lost for Moscow in terms of geopolitics. Three key orthodox countries in the region—Bulgaria, Serbia and Montenegro—are gradually becoming more and more estranged from Russia, despite the close historical ties that had been forged throughout the centuries, including the Orthodox religion. Bulgaria has been a member of the European Union since 2007, became a NATO member in 2004 and is now setting her foreign policy priorities without regard to Russia, as was clearly demonstrated by the incident that halted the construction of the “South Stream” pipeline.

Montenegro has also taken a course towards rapprochement with the West. In 2010 it acquired the status of an EU membership candidate, and in 2016 it ratified an agreement on accession to NATO, which is scheduled for spring 2017. Moscow, which clearly counted on the Orthodox lobby to enable it to carry out pro-Russian policies in Montenegro, clearly regards Podgorica’s policies as nothing

but treachery towards Russia. So, the Russian government’s attempts to salvage its interests in this region ultimately failed.

The only country that still remains outside of the institutions of western integration is Serbia. However, it is reasonable to believe that it is only a matter of time, and sooner or later the final turn of Belgrade towards the west will take place. This is largely due to Russia’s reputation in the eyes of the Serbs, who still cannot forgive her indifference in 1999 when NATO launched “Operation Allied Force” against Yugoslavia.

All this significantly undermines Russia’s position in one of the key regions in which it has political influence, not leaving it any choice but to participate actively in Middle Eastern affairs in order to maintain her influence in the region and to preserve her reputation in the eyes of Middle Eastern Christians. Undoubtedly, a loss of support from Orthodox Christians in the Middle East as well would considerably weaken Russia’s position, putting an end to her “great power” ambitions.

***Russia’s military presence in the Middle East has been justified to the Russian people not only as a fight, but also as a “holy war” which Russia must lead to protect the Christian population of the country.***

Traditionally, Orthodox Christianity has played a key role in the formation of Russian statehood and identity, closely cooperating with the sources of political power, as well as contributing to the legitimization of power in the eyes of Russian society. The Syrian crisis is no exception. Russia’s military presence in the Middle East has been justified to the Russian people not only as a fight, but also as a “holy war” which Russia must lead to protect the





Christian population of the country. Shortly after Russian aircraft raids in Syria began in October 2015, Vladimir Putin told a meeting of Russian officers that,

*“Syria and Lebanon are inhabited by two million Orthodox Christians, and about 5 million of them are spread throughout the Middle East. Regardless of the outcome of the presidential elections in the United States, the White House eager is to wreak havoc in the oil-rich region by supporting such fanatical Islamic organizations as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra.”<sup>14</sup>*

Thus, the Russian president openly declared that Russia was going to return to its Christian roots, with its inherent idea of the “salvation of suffering brothers in faith”. Russian authorities have portrayed their presence in Syria in the context of the spiritual and religious rebirth of Russia in opposition to the politically secular West. Among the Christian clergy of the Middle East meanwhile, there is no consensus about the role of Russia in Syria. On the one hand, the Archbishop of Aleppo, Jean-Clement Zhanbarta, openly supported Russia’s military intervention in 2015.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the Beirut Metropolitan—an abbot of the Greek Orthodox Church—Elias Audi, made his opposition clear as the Russian air strikes began: “Those who kill will not be blessed! The Russian church publically condemned the US war in Iraq in 2003. Today, she uses ‘holy war’ to support Putin in Syria.”<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, when it comes to the discussion of Russian policy towards Christians in the Middle East, it is important to consider that it acts mainly as a way to justify the actions of the Russian authorities in Syria to its own domestic audience, as well as in the eyes of the world. From this point of view, the key aim of this rhetoric is to create a positive image of Russia within the country and possibly to broadcast it outside.



**Endnotes**

- 1- Brown L.C. Imperial legacy: the Ottoman imprint on the Balkans and the Middle East. Columbia University Press, 1996.
- 2- Panchenko K.A. Orthodox Arabs: A path through the century: A collection of articles. Moscow, 2013.
- 3- Ibidem.
- 4- Shkarovsky M.V. The Russian Orthodox Church and Policy of the Soviet State at 1939-1964. Saint Petersburg, 1996.
- 5- Putin: measures to protect Christians in the Middle East are not sufficient, RIA Novosti, April 16, 2015, <https://ria.ru/world/20150416/1058989211.html>
- 6- Russia demands the protection of Christians in the Middle East, Vzglyad, April 6, 2015, <http://vz.ru/politics/2015/4/6/738064.html>
- 7- Patriarch Kirill held a meeting with the delegation of the Patriarchate of Antioch, The Russian Orthodox Church, November 22, 2016, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4693523.html>
- 8- Patriarch Kirill: there is a "holy" war in Syria, BBC Russia, October 19, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/russian/media-37705858>
- 9- The Patriarch and the Pope called on to protect the Middle East Christians, Gazeta.Ru, February, 13, 2016, [https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2016/02/13/n\\_8245673.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2016/02/13/n_8245673.shtml)
- 10- Maltsyv V. In the Syrian war Russia will be supported by Western Christians against the world elite, Life. Religions, August 1, 2016, [https://life.ru/t/%D1%80%Do%B5%Do%BB%Do%B8%Do%B3%Do%B8%D1%8F/885055/v\\_voinie\\_v\\_sirii\\_rossiia\\_poluchit\\_poddierzhku\\_khristian\\_zapada\\_protiv\\_mirovykh\\_elit](https://life.ru/t/%D1%80%Do%B5%Do%BB%Do%B8%Do%B3%Do%B8%D1%8F/885055/v_voinie_v_sirii_rossiia_poluchit_poddierzhku_khristian_zapada_protiv_mirovykh_elit)
- 11- The Syrian schools introduced compulsory study of Russian language, Russia Today, May 29, 2014, <https://russian.rt.com/article/34171>
- 12- The History of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, IOPS, <http://www.ippo.ru/historyippo/archive/subrubric/1011>
- 13- Suhail Farah: Russia is one cares about the Middle East Christianity, Russia and Christian East, February 11, 2015, <http://ros-vos.net/holy-land/7/2/7/>
- 14- Marshall D. Putin Announces Defending Christians Against Obama's Terrorists Operation Salvation, The Marshall Report, October 15, 2015, <https://themarshallreport.wordpress.com/2015/10/15/breaking-news-putin-announces-defending-christians-against-obamas-terrorists-operation-salvation/>
- 15- Syria's Disappearing Christians and the Propaganda War, The Arab News, February 25, 2016, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/society/2016/2/28/syrias-disappearing-christians-and-the-propaganda-war>
- 16- Freeman C. Syria archbishop calls on West to back President Bashar al-Assad in war against Islamist rebels, The Telegraph, October 13, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11929694/Syria-archbishop-calls-on-West-to-back-President-Bashar-al-Assad-in-war-against-Islamist-rebels.html>



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leonid M. Issaev earned his PhD in 2014 from the Institute for African Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences. He is currently a senior lecturer at the Department for Political Science at the National Research University Higher School of Economics. He is the Deputy Chair of the Laboratory for Sociopolitical Destabilization Risk Monitoring at the National Research University Higher School of Economics and senior research fellow at the Institute for African Studies at the Center for Civilization and Regional Studies, which is part of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS). He is a member of the Scientific Council of the Russian Political Sciences Association (RPSA) and the Russian Sociological Society. He is also an expert on the Middle East and Northern Africa at the “Valdai” Club and the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC). Together with Askar Akayev, Andrey Korotaev and Sergey Malkov, he is a manager at the Russian Academy of Sciences program “The Mathematical Modeling of Global and Regional Dynamics Within the Context of the Modernization of Science and Education”. He teaches courses in Islamic political philosophy and political systems and political processes in the Arab world.

Serafim Yuriev – Russian State University for Humanities

#### ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

Address: Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Plaza Floor:6

No:68 Postal Code: 34197

Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey

Telephone: +902126031815

Fax: +902126031665

Email: info@sharqforum.org

**sharqforum.org**



الشرق  
منتدى  
ALSHARQ FORUM

