
The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow's Syrian Campaign

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The role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in Russian national identity, ideology, and politics has grown immensely during the last decades. The faith-strategy nexus in Russia is a topic that has remained largely outside the scope of research. Scholars exploring Russian state-Church relations have paid important but limited attention to the impact of faith on foreign policy, in particular on the Syria operation. Works on Russian policy in the Middle East, as a rule, have left the ecclesiastical component outside the scope of their analysis.

Argued here is that Moscow's diplomatic-military enterprise in Syria has been significantly touched by faith and Church. Although the extent of the ecclesiastical impact is debatable, the campaign is a telling illustration of the nexus of religion and strategy in Russia today. True, the ROC has contributed to Russian foreign and security policy on earlier occasions, but the Syrian case has been the culmination of this bond. The intensity, scope, and duration of the campaign make it a case of unprecedented ecclesiastical presence. One emergent (and probably envisaged) finding is that Russian strategists appear to favor the utility of religion's organizational and justification facets, rather than its theological traits. This memo is mindful not to overblow the proportions of the ecclesiastical impact on Russian national security affairs, but also seeks to put an overlooked phenomenon on the agenda.

Three Ecclesiastical Contributions

Portraying the ROC as the Kremlin's obedient servant subordinated to its will, or speaking about a symphony of equals, where in return for privileges, the ROC delivers ideological support to the Kremlin, would be an oversimplification. The partnership is a "competitive

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model,” where areas of convergence coexist with tensions. On the surface, the Church and the state are on good terms, but the Patriarch seeks to collaborate with the Kremlin mainly when state policy serves ecclesiastical goals. Whatever the nature of the relationship, as of this writing, more keeps the ROC and the Kremlin together than drives them apart. Their views mostly converge, making them allies that share the same values rhetorically and in reality, both in foreign and domestic policies.

During the Syrian campaign, the ROC provided the Kremlin with three deliverables. First, it delivered a messianic *raison d’être* for the leaders contemplating the campaign. Historically, the ROC has provided to Russia’s rulers messianic interpretations, which then underlined foreign policy. The tide of religious metaphysics as a driver of political considerations has ebbed and flowed over history, with varying impact on policy. The ecclesiastical geopolitics peaked under President Vladimir Putin and the Patriarch when the political myths of Holy Rus’, Third Rome, and Russia’s civilizational role became applied notions informing public-political discourse. Thus, this time as well, the ROC introduced the problem of “persecuted Christians” to the Kremlin, and influenced the way in which the Russian establishment framed the country’s role in Syria. The ROC depicted the intervention in conceptual-spiritual terms and presented it as a realization of the Russian civilization’s role—the Third Rome patronizing persecuted Christians. In addition to providing an instrumental pretext for diplomatic-military initiatives, this framing enabled the Kremlin to operate from a position of moral-psychological comfort.

The second ecclesiastical contribution was a legitimization of the Kremlin’s policy at home and abroad. The ecclesiastical public diplomacy engaged foreign leaders, international organizations, the Orthodox world, Christian denominations worldwide beyond it, and, to a certain extent, Muslim audiences, in order to legitimize the Kremlin’s enterprises, promote Moscow’s position, and most recently to assist in raising foreign aid for restoration of the country. The ROC promoted three interrelated messages: that the operation epitomizes the fight of the forces of light against those of evil; that it is not only morally legitimate but also strategically desirable; and that the United States and Russia should put disagreements aside and join forces against terrorism. The establishment of counter-terrorism cooperation with the United States and then extending this momentum to other bones of contention was one of the Kremlin’s main desires. The consonance between the ROC’s plea and similar appeals by Moscow has not been accidental.

In addition, the ROC worked to sustain the necessary level of domestic support. Domestically, the intervention might have not only evoked traumatic associations with the costly and futile military enterprises in Afghanistan and Chechnya, but also appeared more questionable than these previous gambits given the distance from Russia. It demanded huge financial investments and began exactly when sanctions and counter-sanctions hit and energy prices went down, pushing Russia into an economically challenging period, with high inflation. The ROC, which by the beginning of the operation had established itself as an actor capable of influencing public discourse, focused on

neutralizing these concerns. Presumably, in the Syrian case, it felt more comfortable promoting the Kremlin's agenda than it did in the more controversial Ukrainian case. The ROC based its legitimization effort on three notions: Russia's traditional role as protector of persecuted Christians; the centrality of the Syrian community to Orthodox believers as the cradle of Christianity; and Russia's great power status, in counterbalance to American unilateralism.

Finally, during the campaign, the ROC, and in particular the Russian military clergy—a powerful institution established in 2009, and which is part of the Main Political-Military Directorate within the Russian Ministry of Defence since 2018—assisted military commanders in providing a sense of purpose and mission to the servicemen. Russian commanders translated the ROC's narrative about moral obligation and strategic imperative into higher levels of motivation among the servicemen. The military clergy became the effective allies of the commanders in promoting this narrative. Since the beginning of the Russian operation, priests have been performing in all of the branches and have regularly rotated into Syria with the units. Churches have been established within the Russian bases in Khmeimim and Latakia, providing permanent pastoral-patriotic care to units all over Syria. The Russian military brass sees the circle of pastoral activities within the expeditionary force in Syria and the clergy on the battlefield as enhancing unit cohesion and decreasing post-combat stress effects, which together contribute to the overall combat effectiveness of the force.

Conclusion

The contribution of the Russian state-Church nexus to Moscow's performance in Syria and exploitation of the social role of religion in national security is, as CNA Senior Research Scientist Michael Kofman [wrote](#), “a tale of elite instrumentalism, political alliances of convenience, and earnestly held belief.” Since religiosity in Russia appears to be less a practiced faith and, as Kofman says, “more a secular construct of conservative values and traditional ideals, instilled by the state,” the Russian strategic community is exploiting this organizational, rather than theological, utility of religion.

The essence of state-Church relations in Russia is linked to the larger question that all national security establishments face, which is sometimes encompassed by the “die-kill-pay” paradigm: How do you motivate both individuals and society at large to accept the possibility of casualties and loss in pursuing operations and wars of choice, and motivate both the general public and servicepeople? As Professor Nikolas Gvosdev at the U.S. Naval War College [put it](#), “You have to decide what you're willing to die for, what you're willing to kill for, and what you're willing to pay for. [...] The ROC provides a rationale for individuals to sacrifice and to feel that their sacrifices have not been in vain, but in the service of a cause greater than themselves.”

One should not take ROC self-appraisals and Russian officials' praise of the ecclesiastical contributions at face value. Clerical discourse in the mouths of Russian officials, diplomats, and commanders and the hyperbolic language of military clerics do not illustrate the extent to which these views are held among the general public or servicepeople, the extent to which they lead to higher levels of combat effectiveness, and the impact on foreign leaders and audiences abroad. Measuring the ROC's impact in concrete terms demands research beyond the scope of this memo, which has aimed only to highlight the novel aspects of state-Church cooperation in the national security realm and argue that this new collaboration is likely to continue.

Thus, as important as it is not to overblow the ROC's contribution, it is equally important not to underrepresent the significance of religion in Russian national security affairs. Apparently, the above deliverables provided by the ROC to the Kremlin during Moscow's diplomatic-military enterprise in Syria—a sense of mission, international and domestic legitimacy, and enhancement of combat effectiveness—will not be unique to the Syrian campaign. Arguably, these areas of activity may constitute an emerging typology of the ecclesiastical contribution to the state. As such, they are generalizable to the larger discussion of Russian foreign policy, and might be expected in prospective Russian national security enterprises.

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