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Russia plays up ties to Syrian Christians

Russia declares its support for the Orthodox Christian militias fighting alongside the Syrian regime, as it shows great interest in the ideological factor within its expansion and domination strategy in Syria

Al-Monitor (16.02.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3pAON95> - ALEPPO, Syria — The Russian forces operating in Syria honored Feb. 9 two commanders of the National Defense Forces, affiliated with the Syrian regime forces, in the cities of Mahrada and Suqaylabiyah in Hama countryside, and awarded them the [Medal of Fidelity](#) to Russia.

The honoring [statement](#), which was published on Facebook by the National Defense Forces in Suqaylabiyah, stated that due to the successful implementation of special missions and a personal contribution to strengthening combat cooperation, the commander of the Russian ground forces, Gen. Dimitri Glushenkov, awarded the Second Class Loyalty Medal to Russia to the commander of the National Defense Forces in Suqaylabiyah, Nabel al-Abdulla.

Also, the Russian general paid tribute to the commander of the National Defense Forces in Mahrada, [Simon al-Wakil](#), the Syrian army's Brig. Gen. [Saleh al-Abdallah](#) and the member of parliament of the Syrian regime leading the National Defense Forces in the city of Salamiyah in Hama countryside, [Fadel Warda](#).

The ceremony came after the priest of the Russian Khmeimim military base in Latakia [visited Suqaylabiyah](#) Feb. 5 and inspected the construction works at the [Hagia Sophia Church](#), whose [foundation stone](#) was laid on [Sept. 5, 2020](#). The [priest was received](#) by Abdulla.

On Jan. 28, Wakil and Abdulla participated in the [inauguration of a monument](#) commemorating Prince [Alexander Nevsky](#) during their visit to the [Khmeimim base](#).

Russian army leaders have repeatedly visited the cities of Mahrada and [Suqaylabiyah](#) to hold meetings with the commanders of the [National Defense Forces](#) in the two cities and take part in official events. On Oct. 19, 2019, Abdulla [visited Moscow](#) to participate in the Fifth World Christian Conference in Russia.

Wakil, who is [close to Russia](#), is from the predominantly [Christian](#) city of Mahrada. He established National Defense Forces groups there in 2013 to [fight alongside](#) the regime forces against the [Free Syrian Army](#) (FSA).

He also received the Russian [Peace Medal](#) on Jan. 17 and the [Kremlin Medal](#) on Oct. 21, 2020, as his fighters participated in the battles of the northern and western countryside of Hama and Idlib.

Abdulla also enjoys [strong ties](#) with the Russian forces, as he leads an entire militia of [Christian fighters](#). He also participated in the [fighting](#) alongside the regime [against the FSA](#), and he enjoys [wide popularity](#) in Suqaylabiyah.

On July 26, 2020, Abdullah suggested the idea to build a [replica of the Hagia Sophia](#) in Syria during a meeting with a delegation from the Reconciliation Center at the Russian Khmeimim base.

According to RIA Novosti news agency, Vitaly Milonov, deputy of the Russian State Duma, said on July 17, 2020, "Orthodox Christians in Russia can [help Syria build](#) a replica of the Saint Sophia Cathedral in Suqaylabiyah."

Abdullah's decision to build the church came in [response to Turkey](#), which had converted back then the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul into a mosque, 86 years after it was converted into a museum.

The Russian interest in the two Christian areas in the countryside of Hama and the armed militias raises several questions on whether Russia seeks to build ideological alliances in Syria as it did in Iran. Besides the Russian active role in the Syrian economic and military sectors, it seems the ideological factor supports the Russian efforts to expand and stay for a longer time in Syria.

Ahmed Muhammad Hamadeh, a researcher and military analyst, told Al-Monitor, "Russia is trying to garner further support for its policy in Syria, and is supporting military organizations from an ideological standpoint. This explains the religious card and the efforts to build the Hagia Sophia Church with the support and blessing of the Russians. The Russians are insinuating that their battle alongside the Assad regime is sacred."

Military analyst and expert Abdulslam Abdulrzak told Al-Monitor, "Russia is trying to portray itself as the protector of Christians in Syria, as it seeks to win the allegiance of these [Christian] militias to have a strong position in the heart of Syria."

Mohamad Bukaie, a political science lecturer at opposition universities in the countryside of Aleppo, told Al-Monitor, "Russia is showing a remarkable interest in the Christian regions of Mahrada and Suqaylabiyah, and this is a continuation of the Western tradition in general, and the Russian tradition in particular, with regard to minorities in general and Christians in particular. This takes us back to the Kuchuk Kainarji Treaty of 1774, which Russia signed with the Ottoman Caliphate to have the right to sponsor the Orthodox Christian population living in the Ottoman countries."

Bukaie said, "Russia is aware that its ambition for a long-term presence in Syria requires the presence of favorable social environments. It also knows full well that Russia and Iran are competing over the Alawite component, but the Christian component is almost incontrovertible, as it is much closer to Russia. This is why it is important for Russia to portray itself as the protector of Christians — be it in Syria or Russia or before the West."

Political science researcher Bilal Sattouf, who lives in Azaz in the countryside of Aleppo, told Al-Monitor, "The ideological factor is part of the Russian strategy and is exemplified by the support of the Orthodox Church and the armed Orthodox militias, as evidenced by the intensive visits and the building of a miniature version of the Hagia Sophia Church in Suqaylabiyah."

This Russian trend can be explained based on two factors, the first one being related to the competition with the Iranian Shiite ideology in Syria, the religious factor being a top factor used to extend influence, and the second is related to breathing new life into the Russian role as a protector of the Eastern Orthodox Christians.

Mideast church leaders, others urge Biden to lift Syrian sanctions

- [Doreen Abi Raad](#)



Internally displaced Syrians walk past tents at a camp in the countryside near Aleppo Jan. 20, 2021. Several Mideast church leaders have signed on to a letter urging U.S. President Joe Biden to end sanctions against Syria. (Credit: Mahmoud Hassano/Reuters via CNS.)

Crux Now (22.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/39849wB> - In a joint letter, a group of church leaders and international figures appealed to U.S. President Joe Biden to lift economic sanctions imposed on the Syrian people and “to help Syrians alleviate a humanitarian crisis that threatens to trigger a new wave of instability in the Middle East.”

“We wish to lose no time approaching you for an urgent response to the severe humanitarian crisis in Syria,” they wrote Jan. 21, after first congratulating Biden on his inauguration.

Michel Abs, secretary-general of the Middle East Council of Churches, sent the letter, signed by nearly 100 political, social and religious officials from the region and the world. The signatories included Syriac Catholic Patriarch Ignace Joseph III Younan; Melkite Catholic Patriarch Joseph Absi; and Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II.

They pointed out that in December, Alena Douhan, U.N. special rapporteur on unilateral coercive measures, asked the United States to lift the sanctions.

Their letter cited what was stated by Douhan, that the U.S. sanctions “violate the human rights of the Syrian people” and “exacerbate the already dire humanitarian situation in Syria, especially in the course of COVID-19 pandemic, by blocking aid, trade and investment necessary for Syria’s health system and economy to function.”

The appeal noted that Douhan’s findings reflect a growing consensus among humanitarian and human rights groups that “this form of collective punishment of the civilian population is driving Syria into an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe.”

They stressed that 10 years ago, Syria was the region’s food basket, but now it is on the verge of famine.

In June, the World Food Program warned that half of all Syrians were going to bed hungry and the country was on the brink of “mass starvation.”

Meanwhile, COVID-19 is spreading, unhindered by a health care system largely destroyed over 10 years of war, the letter said.

“Millions of hard-pressed Syrians will go to bed hungry and cold tonight,” the letter stated. “Unilateral coercive measures imposed by the United States make the economic plight of the Syrian people worse.”
