

THE PRESENCE OF RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN THE ARAB WORLD¹

Pavel V. Gusterin

Center for Asia and the Middle East of The Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS)

With the election of Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, Metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad Kirill in February 2009 the activity of Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) outside Russia has significantly grown. The revitalization of the ROC abroad occurred due to the following reasons:

- 1) aspiration of new head of the ROC to strengthen its influence in the world;
- 2) establish cooperation of Russian Orthodox Church with government agencies, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs;
- 3) growth of the authority of Russia in the international arena, that manifests itself in respect to the ROC by the official authorities;
- 4) departure for permanent residence abroad of a large number of Russians who begin to experience the need for spiritual communication, including the nourishment of the Church, which requires the construction and opening of new parishes.

As a result, the ROC to date acquired features of an influential factor in the world politics. ROC in the international arena watches over not only own interests, but also in the areas permitted by its Charter, represents the interests of countries as its canonical territory, that is where the church or any other Christian denominations can not operate without the consent of ecclesiastical authorities of the territory.

Revitalization of the ROC didn't pass the Arab East. In 2001 the presence of the ROC on the territory of the Arab countries was insignificant: representation office functioned in Damascus (Syria), metochions in Alexandria, Cairo (Egypt) and Beirut (Lebanon) and in Morocco and Tunisia stavropegic, i.e. subordinated directly to the patriarch, parishes.

Now, more than ten temples of the ROC function on the territory of the Arab states. The metochion in Cairo was transformed into Representation office of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia affiliated with the Patriarch of Alexandria and All Africa. At the same time the primates of the Orthodox Churches of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem assist the construction of the ROC temples on their canonical territories.

Due to the growth of the ROC prestige a land area of 1 hectare on the territory of religious and archaeological reserve "Baptism site of Jesus Christ" (El Magtas) was transferred to Russia perpetuity and free of charge on the initiative of King Abdullah II of Jordan in July, 2006. In 2007, the Russian side has decided to build on this site a home for pilgrims, which was opened in June 2012 by President Vladimir Putin during his visit to Jordan.

Being a chairman of the Department of External Church Relations (DECR) incumbent Patriarch Kirill paid attention not only to canonic communication with the Orthodox churches in the Arab

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countries, but also with Muslim clergy, especially in Syria. In December 2005 he traveled to Yemen, in September 2007 he visited the United Arab Emirates.

It's noteworthy that the activity of the Russian Orthodox Church outside its canonical territory causes jealousy of the Roman Catholic Church. For example, the Municipality of Sharjah (UAE) registered the orthodox parish of the Russian Orthodox Church (the church of St. Philip) in the Emirate of Sharjah on the 4th of April, 2007 and on the 1st of June, 2007 the Vatican established diplomatic relations with the UAE at the highest level that can be regarded as a reaction of the Holy See to the presence of the ROC in the UAE.

In the recent years, the visits of senior hierarchs of the Orthodox Churches of the Middle East to Russia became frequent. One of the reasons for these visits was the fact that in conditions of growing fundamentalism and the facts of persecution of Christians which became more frequent the Oriental Orthodox Autocephalous Church of the Middle East are counting on the support of the ROC. Arab Christians in the current political environment consider Russia and ROC as their defenders. A family of Egyptian Copts of ten people who have become refugees because of persecution of Islamists in Egypt arrived to Moscow on the 1st of February, 2014. It is noteworthy that the ROC doesn't have a canonical communication with Coptic church for religious reasons. Nevertheless, the awareness of religious unity gives Christians of various denominations hope to get help from Russian state and the ROC.

The persecution of the Russian Orthodox Church congregation in the Arab countries is also present. Since November 2011 the Church of Resurrection in the capital of Tunisia several times became the object of extremists' attacks and the prior of the temple openly receives threats. The Christian cemetery was desecrated there in April 2012.

In June 2012 in Casablanca (Morocco) has been held a rally against the demolition of the temple of Assumption of Mary, which was also participated by Moroccans, married to a Russian women.

In recent years, before the growth of Islamic extremists activity the leadership of the ROC accorded great importance to creating a positive image and correct perception of church policy among the Muslim people of the Arab countries. During the visit to Egypt in June, 2011 the DECR chairman Metropolitan of Volokolamsk Hilarion gave a speech called "Muslims and Christians" in the largest Islamic University "Al-Azhar". Metropolitan Hilarion expressed hope that his visit to "Al-Azhar" will become a continuation of the dialogue, which was initiated by Patriarch Kirill, who visited the university in April 2010.

ROC doesn't forget about the Arabic-speaking Christians. On the 5th of December, 2012 the presentation of the Arabic translation of Patriarch Kirill's book "Freedom and responsibility. In Search of Harmony" has been held in the Russian Centre of Science and Culture of Beirut. Annual Christmas and Easter messages of Patriarch Kirill along with other foreign languages are translated into Arabic. Patriarch Kirill donated \$ 50K to Balamand University in November 2011.

The Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society with the participation of Russian Orthodox Church was engaged in collecting aid for Syrian people from March 31 to April 10, 2013: more than 70 tons of humanitarian aid were managed to be collected within 2 weeks, the aid included food and medications. This property has been transferred to the Patriarch of Antioch, John X and Mufti of Syria, Ahmad Badr al-Din Hassoun.

From 2 to 4 September, 2013 in Amman, an international interfaith conference "Challenges for

Christian Arabs” has been held on the initiative of King Abdullah II and under the patronage of the Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad. The delegation from the ROC took part in the conference with the blessing of Patriarch Kirill. The delegation was joined by Metropolitan of Tambov and Rasskazov Feodosy and Acting Head of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem abbott Theophan (Lukyanov).

As a result of the foregoing, the ROC begins to play a significant role in Russian foreign policy. Patriarch Kirill meets with the top leaders of the Arab countries. Especially frequent nature have his meetings with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, due to whose political decision it was decided to return land located in the Holy Land to Russia: Russia acquired full ownership of three sites in the city of Jericho. Intensive contacts with the leaders of Palestine are explained by interest in support of Russia in the international arena as well as functioning of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society in Palestine.

Extensive contacts of Moscow Patriarchate with official representatives of the Arab states are indicators of political activity of the ROC. In September, 2009 in the Red Hall of Christ the Saviour Cathedral the Patriarch Kirill met with ambassadors and chargé d'Arab accredited in the Russian Federation. Previously such a meeting has been held in November 2005, back when the Patriarch Kirill was the chairman of DECR.

The overall strengthening of the ROC ties with the Arab states is obvious. Since 2001, the ROC delegation visited Egypt, Iraq, Qatar, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and the UAE. Peacemaking trip to the pre war Bagdad is especially worth of attention, the delegation was headed by Bishop of Magadan and Sinegorsk Theophan and Supreme Mufti Talgat Tadzhuiddin that clearly demonstrated the common position of the Russian Christians and Muslims in the face of new challenges and threats.